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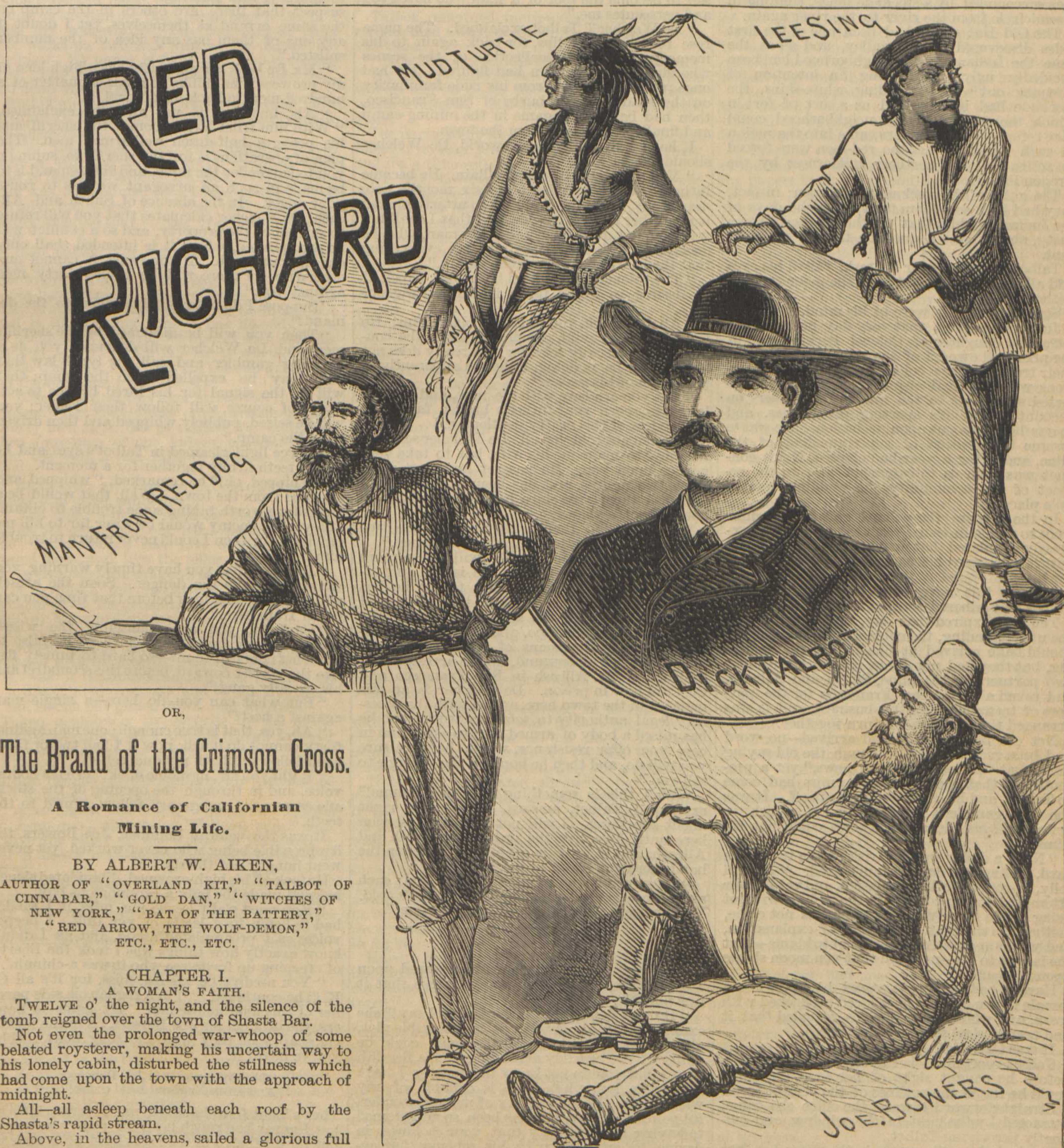
Vol. XXVIII.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., August 5, 1885.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 354



OR,

The Brand of the Crimson Cross.

A Romance of Californian
Mining Life.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "OVERLAND KIT," "TALBOT OF
CINNABAR," "GOLD DAN," "WITCHES OF
NEW YORK," "BAT OF THE BATTERY,"
"RED ARROW, THE WOLF-DEMON,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A WOMAN'S FAITH.

TWELVE o' the night, and the silence of the
tomb reigned over the town of Shasta Bar.

Not even the prolonged war-whoop of some
belated roysterer, making his uncertain way to
his lonely cabin, disturbed the stillness which
had come upon the town with the approach of
midnight.

All—*all* asleep beneath each roof by the
Shasta's rapid stream.

Above, in the heavens, sailed a glorious full

moon, whose light revealed the face of nature almost as plainly as though the sun shone.

Up, on the bank of the river, a short distance above the town, stood the works of the Old Hat Mining Company, a concern which played quite a prominent part in our former tale treating of Richard Talbot's adventures in this region, and which was called "Lion Hearted Dick."

A year has elapsed since the events took place which formed the basis of that story, and during that time the mining company had prospered, thanks to Talbot's skill and energy. Just a year ago he had become the superintendent of the concern, and from the first seemed to put new life into it.

And now on this night of which we write he sat in the little office shanty, busily engaged by the light of a candle in some abstruse calculations.

A year had not changed our hero materially, for he was one of those men who seem to laugh at the ravages of time.

His brown-black locks curled as of yore without a trace of silver, his keen eyes were as bright and as piercing as ever, his form as muscular and erect.

He was attired in black, as was his wont, but as he had, since taking command of the mine, given up all his sporting habits, the elaborately ruffled shirt was replaced by a plain white one.

The night was warm, so he had laid aside his coat and sat in his shirt-sleeves, a vest being generally deemed a superfluous article of clothing up in the mining-regions.

Before him was an uncurtained window which commanded a view of the entrance-gate to the premises. The property of the mining company was surrounded by a stockade fence, running in a semicircle from the river to the river again.

The Old Hat claim had been one of the first lodes discovered in that valley, and as at the time the Indians in the neighborhood had been decidedly ugly, manifesting an intention of "wiping out" the intruding white-skins, the stockade had been erected as a sort of fort in which the settlers in the neighborhood could take refuge, but the miners came into the region in such numbers that the red-men were forced to retire to the northern wilderness by the Oregon line.

The gates of the stockade were open; in fact, they had been so seldom used since the days of the Indian troubles that the hinges had grown rusty, and it was a question if they could be shut.

Talbot, puzzling over his task, raised his eyes and allowed them to rest upon the moonlit space without.

Strange thoughts were in his mind.

Just one year ago that very day he and Carlotta, the daughter of Colonel Perkins, one of the principal owners of the mine, had plighted their troth, but the colonel, with the strict notions which he had acquired in early life, objected somewhat to the union of the lovers on account of Talbot's sporting proclivities, and so our hero was put upon probation. He was to assume the position of superintendent of the mine, and after a year had elapsed, if his conduct was such as to commend him to the respect of the community, the wedding was to take place.

In the interim the colonel and his daughter were to reside in San Francisco, and it was expressly stipulated that no communication of any nature whatsoever was to take place between the lovers.

And to this agreement both Carlotta and Talbot had adhered scrupulously.

The year expired that day, and according to the understanding, the colonel and his daughter should have arrived at Shasta Bar that morning, but they had not come, although the other two partners in the mine, Smith and Allcash, had taken a trip to San Francisco for the purpose of transacting a little business, and it was arranged that all should return together.

Not one of the party had arrived—no word had been received, and although the old saying holds that "no news is good news," yet a presentiment that something was amiss had come to Talbot, and he could not shake it off. It was the old gambler's superstition, of which, in spite of all his education, Talbot could not rid himself.

"Nary a dollar would I risk on the turn of a card, feeling as I do," he murmured. "It is all folly, of course—all imagination, and yet I never attempted to run counter to the feeling without being made to pay for it. She has not come, neither has she sent me a word of explanation, and yet I am as satisfied she is not to blame—that she is true to me—as I am that yon moon shines upon the earth!"

Hardly had the words passed his lips when a female figure rode up on a steed all flecked with foam, and whose panting sides revealed that it had been pushed to its topmost speed.

It was Carlotta!

Talbot recognized her upon the instant, even before he caught sight of her face, for never could he forget the outlines of the perfect form. Straightforward toward the office she came, attracted by the light in the window, and evidently perceiving Talbot.

She had changed greatly in the year; her face

was thinner, and the signs of care and anxiety were plainly visible.

Talbot hastened to meet her, and the two came face to face half-way between the house and the gates.

"Oh, Dick, dear Dick—I have kept faith—I am here on the appointed day!" she exclaimed, as she fell, exhausted, upon his breast.

"But what is the matter—why have you come alone and at such an hour as this?" he asked, as he supported her beautiful form in his strong arms.

"You must prepare yourself to hear bad news," she replied, as soon as she could recover from her emotion.

The remembrance of the presentiment which had so weighed upon him came to Talbot at once; it was more reality than imagination after all.

"I am prepared—always prepared," he remarked, with a quiet smile, looking down into the beautiful but troubled face, upturned to his. "Bad news will not worry me much so long as I retain your love."

"And that will last while life remains!" she cried, impulsively. "But such terrible things have occurred since we parted. My father—you know his old infirmity—his passion for liquor?"

"Yes, but I thought he had learned to restrain himself—I do not mean to let liquor alone altogether, but to go slow on it so as not to hurt him?"

"So he did for a time, but for the last six months he has been worse than ever, and now he has become a perfect wreck. He is no longer in possession of his senses, and has allowed himself to become the tool of a man who hates you and persecutes me."

"De Welcher!" Talbot exclaimed. The name rose readily to his lips, for back again to his memory came the recollection of the scenes wherein the Californian had figured. He had once rescued Carlotta from his rude familiarity on the road in the suburbs of San Francisco, then had baffled his game in the mining-camp and finally driven him from the town.

If he had an enemy in the world, De Welcher should be the man.

"You are right; it is that villain. He became intimate with my father some six months ago, despite my warnings, and now so utterly broken is my father that he has declared that I shall not wed you, but must marry this vile man, who, he declares, is rich enough to give me everything that the heart of a woman can desire."

"The colonel must indeed be a total wreck if he desires to break faith in this outrageous way."

"Ah, but, Dick, you must not blame him! He is like a little child, completely under the control of this rascally schemer; he really does not know what he is doing, although apparently in possession of his senses."

"But you are here with me now, and we can laugh to scorn your father's broken faith and the devices of this crafty gentleman."

"I have not told you all. De Welcher schemes not only to make me his wife, but to take vengeance upon you. He has set his heart upon these two desires, and has been working to accomplish them ever since he left this neighborhood, about a year ago."

"He will find that neither one of the two things will be easy to bring about, I fancy."

"Do not underrate him; he will prove more dangerous than you think. He is rich and utterly unscrupulous. From my father he has bought nearly all his stock in this mine, and that, together with the shares which he purchased in San Francisco, gives him the controlling interest. By means of some legal trick which I do not understand, he has arrested Mr. Smith and Mr. Allcash in San Francisco, and they are now in prison. De Welcher is at this moment in the town here, armed with the necessary legal authority to seize the works, and he has raised a body of armed men to assist him in case you offer resistance, which he feels sure you will do, and then he hopes in the struggle to kill you."

"Well, this is something of a programme!" exclaimed Talbot, amazed. "But he's right about one thing. I will not give up possession here until I receive the order from Smith and Allcash, and if force is attempted I reckon the hands here will stand by me."

"Dick, you haven't a man to back you; each and all have been bought by De Welcher's gold. You are here alone, deserted by every one!"

CHAPTER II.

OLD PARDS.

AN expression of amazement appeared upon Talbot's face. He could hardly believe that it was possible.

"Do not doubt the truth of what I say!" she exclaimed. "I know that it is a horrible plot, although it does not seem that a man could be guilty of deliberately arranging such a fiendish trap. But you do not know this man as I have learned to know him. He is capable of any wickedness. He has plenty of money, wonderful political power, and has been so accustomed to having his own way that your boldness in daring to interfere with his schemes has en-

raged him to such a degree that he has sworn to have your life, no matter how great the cost.

"He has proceeded in the most careful manner, too; for nearly a year he has been making preparations to strike the blow."

"Have you not noticed that within the last five or six months twenty or thirty strangers have taken up their quarters in this camp? Men rude and rough in their bearing, and who seemed to have but little to do, idling their time away and yet having money upon which to live?"

"Yes; I have noticed it, and wondered how the fellows managed to get along. I thought at first that they were gamblers who had flocked into the Bar with the idea, as it was a flourishing camp, it would be a good place for them to locate, but I have noticed that quite a number of them never touch a card."

"Each and every one of them is De Welcher's man, and depends for his support upon the money paid him by this arch-plotter."

"He has colonized the town, so that when the moment arrives for him to deal you a decisive blow he will be able to call a small army to his assistance."

"Every one is a picked man, specially selected by De Welcher on account of his fitness for the purpose which he has in view. If you have noticed them you must have seen that there are few brawlers and no drunkards among them, but nearly all quiet, resolute men who can be depended upon to do good work when the time comes. And not one of them either has any idea of the nature of the service expected of them, except that they have been told they may have fighting to do. Each man is sworn to secrecy, and although some of them may suspect that there are others in the camp on the same errand as themselves, yet I doubt if any one of them has any idea of the number enlisted."

"Mr. De Welcher evidently has a high idea of my prowess if he thinks he needs a quarter of a hundred men to back his quarrel."

"Ah, but that is not all!" she exclaimed.

"With him from Yreka comes the sheriff and his posse, a half-dozen well-armed men. The plan of operations is for the sheriff to summon you to surrender the mine, and the demand is to be made in such an arrogant way as to rouse your anger. In the absence of Smith and Allcash, De Welcher calculates that you will refuse to surrender the property, and so a conflict will be precipitated, which it is intended shall only end in your death. If you resist it cannot end otherwise, for there will be nearly forty men against you."

"Suppose I do not resist but yield to the demand?"

"Then you will be disarmed by the sheriff's men and De Welcher will denounce you as a cheating gambler and call for lynch law that you may be expelled from the camp; that will be the signal for his hired braves to act. They, of course, will follow their leader; you will be seized, publicly whipped and then driven from the camp."

A fierce light gleamed in Talbot's eyes and he set his teeth firmly together for a moment.

"Whipped, eh?" he remarked, "whipped and expelled from the town. Well, that would be a vengeance worth taking some trouble to obtain, and yet my enemy would be wiser far to kill me outright, for then I could never return to trouble him."

"But now that you have timely warning you can easily evade the danger. Soon the attack will be made, and long before that time you can be far from here."

"Carlotta, you are counseling the wisest course, I know, but it is so hard to be false to the trust confided to me—so hard to tamely fly, like the veriest coward, before this scoundrel and his rascally gang!"

"But what can you do here—a single man against a host?"

"Ah, yes, that is true enough; one man against forty cannot do much; now if I had two or three good fellows to back my quarrel—"

"Right you air, me noble dook!" cried a hoarse voice, and in through the opening of the stockade came a fat and greasy fellow, armed to the teeth.

It was the veteran bummer, Joe Bowers, the irrepressible being who never worked, yet never went hungry nor thirsty.

He took off his high-crowned, dilapidated slouch hat and made the lady a ceremonious bow.

"You must r'ally 'scuse me, miss, if I kinder had to listen to a leetle of yer talk. I heered voices as I preamulated along, and as I didn't know exactly how things was I took the liberty of creeping up for to see who it was a-chinnin'."

"You needn't be afeard, miss, for it's all O. K.," he continued. "I'm a reg'lar ole side partner of this hyer gentleman. My name is Bowers, the original ole Joe Bowers. I'm the identical chap wot they writ the song 'bout, mebbe you've heard it,

"Oh, my name it is Joe Bowers, And from England I did come!"

Thar's 'bout four hundred more verses into it, but I never had much head for poetry anyway, but for all that, I'm the right kind of a man to

tie to. I reckon me noble dook hyer will be willing to swar to that!"

"I've always found you square," said Talbot. "You bet!" responded the bummer, impressively. "Waal, miss, I heered ye a-laying out the peppergram and I must allow you've got it as straight as a string. I'm posted, yer know, 'cos I'm one of the gang. The head devil engaged me at Yreka yesterday, and I jest arrove to-night. Thar war three on us got in—three old pards o' yourn, Captain Dick, w'ot jest met by chance—the usual way—in Yreka, all on us clean bu'sted—right down to bed-rock, and we jumped at the hooportunity for to put in a squar' meal, as quick as a hungry trout for a gentle grasshopper."

"And though I say it w'ot shouldn't, three better men never breathed this hyer Californian air."

"The boss w'ot hired us is a-holding a meeting down in the camp now, a-gittin' ready for to clean you out by hyer, and the moment me and my pards tumbled to the leetle game we 'passed' and went out; no tackling Dick Talbot—bold Injun Dick—in ours, if you please, and the long and the short of the matter is, if you keer to make a fight, hyer's three braves w'ot will stand by you till they turn their toes up to the daisies!"

Then Bowers gave a short, shrill whistle, there was the sound of footsteps outside, and through the gate of the stockade came a brawny red-haired, red-bearded giant, roughly-clad, but well-armed.

"I'm yer antelope!" he exclaimed, making for Talbot with outstretched hand. "Gosh! Cap, if the sight of you ain't good for sore eyes then I don't want a cent! Oh! this makes me feel young ag'in—the old days come back! Ag'in I raise my war-whoop! I'm the biggest chief w'ot walks on two legs west of the darned old Rockies! My name is fight and bloody massacre! I'm Dandy Jim, the Man from Red Dog, and don't you forget it!"

And it was indeed the brawny old-time pard of Injun Dick who had thus unexpectedly made his appearance.

After the Red-Dogite, with dignified tread came a tall and stately form wrapped from head to heel in a tattered blanket. The massive head was surmounted by a battered silk hat, so terribly the worse for wear that one could hardly imagine that it had ever been a glossy "tile."

"Mad Turtle is a big chief!" he said, as the giant stepped to one side so as to allow the Indian to grasp Dick's welcoming hand. "Many moons have come and gone since he has met his white brother, but the memory of the Blackfoot chief is like the big sun—it has no end. It is the snake chief's 'edge,' let my brother 'see' his bet and 'chip' in for all he is worth. Mud Turtle will back his game till the sun grows old and the big pines touch the sky!"

"Miss, how does this hyer strike you fur a reinforcement?" Joe Bowers cried, triumphantly. "Forty men ag'in' one is mighty big odds, but when four men of our kidney put our backs ag'in' the wall, it will take an army to boost us out!"

"Right you air, you durned old fat rascal!" Dandy Jim cried, admiringly.

"The cuss w'ot is running the game calculates to ketch our old pard a-napping, but bold Cap'n Talbot has lots of pards lying around loose, and, like the feller in ancient history w'ot sowed the dragon's teeth, all he has to do is to raise a yell and armed men will come right up outen the ground, ready and willing to stand by him until the last cuss is hung."

At this point another figure appeared upon the scene, gliding through the opening in the stockade with the stealthy step of a ghost.

It was a medium-sized man, all muffled up in a dilapidated overcoat, and with a shockingly bad slouch hat pulled down over his eyes.

Taken completely by surprise by the unexpected appearance, Dick and his friends grasped their weapons, but the new-comer put a stop to the hostile demonstrations by whipping off his hat and displaying the well-known features of the Chinaman, Lee Sing.

"Allee light!" he cried; "me come; fightee too, heap good, allee same 'Melican man!" and to give due effect to his words he produced a pair of heavy revolvers which he flourished in the air.

"Washee-Washee" had got an inkling of what was going on, and he had come to aid the only white man who had ever made an impression upon his peculiar nature—the only Christian who had ever done him an act of kindness.

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVANCE IN FORCE.

THE irrepressible bummer could not repress a shrill yell of delight.

"Durn my cats! if things ain't working when even a Chinaman is a-willing for to chip in and take a hand in the fun!"

"You see, Carlotta, I am not quite so friendless as this sharp who seeks revenge upon me supposes," Talbot remarked.

"But is there a chance with this slender force that you can repel the threatened attack?" the girl asked, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, with such men as these, well-armed and knowing how to make every shot tell, aided by the shelter that we have here, the odds are decidedly in our favor, even though the attacking force outnumber us ten to one."

"Besides, marm," put in Bowers, "the boys won't expect sich a warm recept' as we'll give 'em. They'll kinder look on it as a sort of a hurrah picnic, but when we send the leaden pills a-singing around their ears, they'll be better galoots than I think they air, if they stand up and take their fodder with a grin."

"You bet!" cried Dandy Jim, sententiously, while the Indian nodded and the Chinese grinned assent.

"Heaven keep you from harm!" exclaimed the lady.

"When my time comes I must go, Carlotta, and not before," Talbot observed, in his quiet way. "But the hour for the attack draws on apace, and although I should be glad to keep you here with me, yet I know you had best be gone."

The maiden bowed assent; Talbot conducted her to her horse and assisted her to mount.

When fairly in the saddle she took the reins, then bending low, with a sudden impulse she threw her arms around Talbot's neck and imprinted a fervent kiss upon his lips.

"Whatever happens I am yours, and yours only!" she cried. "If you live, I will be your wife, no matter if the whole world stands between. If you fall, I will avenge you as the Corsican women avenge their lovers when suddenly cut off by treacherous assassination. This is my vow and I swear it before high Heaven!"

A warm clasp of the hand and the lovers parted.

Talbot remained motionless until the hoof-strokes died away, and then he returned to the stockade.

"Now, boys, we must get to work," he said. "We haven't much time to prepare before the wolves will be down upon us, and we mustn't waste a minute. The first thing is to close the gates."

The party went at this task with a will, but found it no easy job, for the hinges were rusty and for a time refused to work.

At last, however, the ponderous gate was shut and barred, and then by Talbot's direction a barrel was placed on end by the gate so as to afford a stand for him to address the assailants when they made their appearance.

"We'll give them fair warning, boys, although they don't really deserve it," he remarked. "But we'll fight them fair and square; we'll let them understand that we are armed, prepared for the attack, and mean business, every time; then, if they persist in coming on, their blood will be upon their own heads."

The rest thought this was about the way the affair should be managed, and Joe Bowers gave voice to the opinion by exclaiming:

"Squar' as a die, bet all you've got on it! and if we can't salivate this hyer crowd of ornery roosters, then we ought to be kicked to death by cripples!"

Talbot's plan was simple enough. After warning the attacking force that he meant fight and that some one would get hurt if the attack was persisted in, he intended to ambush his party behind the buildings, which were only about a hundred feet from the stockade wall, so, when the assailants clambered over the fence, it would be an easy matter for the defenders of the fort to make every shot tell, thanks to the moonlight.

There were five of them, each armed with a pair of revolvers, either six or seven-shooters, so that they had between sixty and seventy shots, and Talbot felt satisfied that at such a point-blank range his followers would not be apt to waste many bullets.

If the assailants succeeded in storming the wall, then a retreat was to be made into the shanty which served as an office. It was a stoutly-constructed building, isolated from the rest, and would serve admirably for a citadel.

Talbot had calculated shrewdly, having had considerable experience in such affairs as this; he thought the chances were good that half of the attacking force would be disabled before the wall could be surmounted, and then, if the attackers had stomach for more fight, after such a bloody lesson, which he considered to be extremely doubtful, he felt sure that the first assault made by them upon the shanty would be repulsed in so bloody a fashion that, unless they were more than men, they would seek safety in flight.

Hardly had all preparation been made when the Indian, who had been placed upon the lookout, announced the approach of the attacking force.

There were crevices between the logs of the fence through which the besieged could look, and each one hastened to secure a convenient peep-hole.

By this time the new-comers were in sight, and Talbot's quick eyes, used to such calculation, decided that there were at least forty men in the troop, and quite a number of them were armed with guns, for he could plainly distinguish the glitter of the moonbeams on the barrels.

These men were in the advance, and with them was De Welcher and a tall, brawny, long-bearded fellow, whom Talbot guessed to be the sheriff.

"That is the sheriff's posse," he murmured, "but their guns will not be of much use, for this fight must be settled at close quarters."

The "army" came to a sudden halt.

De Welcher noticed that the gates of the stockade were closed and his suspicions were at once excited.

He called to some of the men behind him, they advanced, and Talbot smiled bitterly when he recognized that these fellows were the hands who had been employed in the works.

De Welcher had planned with devilish cunning, and had it not been for the devotion of Carlotta and the fortunate accident of the three pards taking service with the arch-plotter, Talbot would have been delivered, bound hand and foot, into the power of his enemy.

After a brief consultation with the workmen De Welcher again gave the signal to advance. The closed gate puzzled him—he was afraid that something was wrong, but concluded to push forward, anyhow.

When the intruders got within a thousand feet of the wall, Talbot jumped upon the barrel and rose from behind the stockade, greatly to the astonishment of the attacking force, who halted instantly without waiting for orders.

"Gentlemen, what is the meaning of this hyer?" the superintendent cried.

There was a whispered consultation between De Welcher and the sheriff, and then that individual stepped forward.

He was a stranger to Talbot, personally, but he had often heard of the man; the reputation of the official was an unsavory one, and there were many in the district who did not hesitate to say that Tim Benefast, as the sheriff was called, was as big a rascal as any criminal that he had ever laid the "clamps" of the law upon.

The man's appearance did not belie his reputation, and he looked every inch a ruffian as he stepped forward in the moonlight after being instructed by the Californian.

"I reckon you're the feller I want, Mr. Man!" exclaimed the official, drawing some legal-looking papers from his pocket and waving them in the air. "My name is Tim Benefast; mebbe you've heered of me. I'm the sheriff, and if so be as how you are Dick Talbot, Superintendent of the Old Hat mine, I've got a leetle document hyer that I should like to have you cast your eyes over."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Sheriff, but I don't care to bother myself with it. I've about given up reading, and especially light literature. Let some of your friends yonder take a hack at it; among so great a crowd there must be some who like to read," Talbot answered.

The sheriff scowled, for the reply annoyed him, and De Welcher seized upon the opportunity to whisper in his ear:

"The rascal is making game of you; better come to action as soon as possible."

"See hyer, young fellow, I don't want any chinning out of you!" the sheriff cried, roughly. "In my official capacity I have come to take possession of this hyer property, and I want you to dust out of it as lively as possible."

"By what right do you make such a demand?"

"An order from the court; hyer it is," and the official stepped forward to hand the paper to Talbot, but that gentleman brought him to a sudden halt by leveling his revolver full at his person.

"Go slow!" Talbot cried. "I don't know whether you are the sheriff or not, and I don't care a copper. You haven't served me with any paper, and I don't intend you shall. I'm in possession of this property, and I'm going to hold it. I give you fair warning, if you advance I will drive a ball through your heart."

"Durn me if he ain't showing fight!" cried the official, amazed. "Look hyer, you ignoramus! don't you see the gang I've got with me? What chance do you think you stand, all alone, against our crowd?"

"Oh, but I'm not alone; I knew you were coming, and so I called in my friends, and I reckon we can make it lively for you. Yell, boys!"

And yell the four pards did with a vim that woke the echoes of the neighboring hills.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE DOOM.

THE attackers looked at each other in amazement. This discovery was entirely unexpected.

De Welcher had made a brief speech to the crowd before starting, explaining the purpose of the expedition, so that the "army" expected that a single man would be all they would encounter: they had entered into the affair with the idea that the capture of the mine would be an easy matter, but now circumstances had assumed a more serious turn.

The men within the stockade had made so much noise that those without came to the conclusion that Talbot had ten or fifteen at his back at the least.

The sheriff, although something of a bully

and much given to bragging, yet had a deal of bull-dog courage, and was not the kind of a man to back down without a fight.

"I say, De Welcher!" he exclaimed, "thar ain't much use to waste your breath on this fellow. He's going to be ugly, and seeing as how he's got backing, he ain't a-going to be talked into giving up this hyer mine peaceably, so the quicker we wade in to clean him out the better."

"My own idea exactly," the plotter replied, secretly delighted with the way matters were progressing, for a conflict wherein Dick might be conquered was precisely what he wanted. "Better give him a little warning though, so as to have the right on our side; we want to do everything legally and in order, you know."

"Sart'in! that's the kind of a man I am."

"Say, Cap, how much will it be worth to the coon w'ot plugs this galoot?" asked a brawny fellow, dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, looking like a hunter, who had drawn near so as to overhear the conversation.

"A hundred dollars," replied De Welcher, carelessly, for he was not impressed with the man's looks, and the old-fashioned revolvers that he carried were certainly not dangerous-looking weapons.

"I reckon that arter you gi'n him the warning, if he don't throw up the sponge to once, he is anybody's meat, eh?" queried the man.

"Oh, yes, that's according to Hoyle!" the sheriff replied, whereupon the man grinned and fell back among the crowd.

"Now see hyer!" exclaimed the burly official, addressing Talbot, "we don't want to have any fuss with you, and I jest want you to remember that I am the sheriff proceeding in the discharge of my duty. I have been directed to take possession of these hyer premises, and hearing that you were inclined to be ugly once in a while, I brought a big force along, so you wouldn't have any excuse for cutting up rusty 'bout it. You can't hope to make a successful fight, and so I give you fair warning to get out. If you attempt to resist, I sha'n't answer for the consequences."

"I have been intrusted with the charge of this property, and until I receive orders from the owners to give it up I shall retain possession even at the risk of life," Talbot replied.

"The property is in the hands of the law now; Smith and Allcash are in jail and likely to be put through a course of sprouts afore they get through. For the last time, I demand you to surrender this property peaceably."

"I refuse, and if you attempt to use force I shall resist by all the means in my power."

"Do you dare to defy me?" yelled the sheriff.

"I dare!"

Hardly had the words been spoken when the sharp crack of a rifle rung out on the still air.

Talbot with a gasp tumbled forward, pitched over the edge of the stockade and with a heavy thud came to the ground outside.

"I reckon I'll take thet leetle hundred dollars, if you please!" cried the man in buckskin, rising to his feet, grasping a still-smoking rifle in his hand.

He had knelt down and taken aim over a tree-stump so as to make sure of his shot.

"I hit him plum-center, right in the forehead over the eyes," he continued. "Tain't for nothing that I am called the Boss Shot of the Willamette."

A thrill of horror ran through the crowd, rough, rude men though they were.

It was a horrid deed!

For a moment the pards within the stockade stared like statues, and then Bowers, the quickest-witted of all, spoke:

"The jig is up, boys; they've plugged him for good and all; we can't do him any good by making a fight; none of ther gang have seen us, so the best thing we kin do is to retreat; we kin sneak out at the back, skin round and jine them; then, by keeping our eyes open, we kin spot every man w'ot had a hand in it, and when the time comes we kin make 'em cuss the day they tackled our pard."

The advice was good, the rest nodded assent and then like ghosts glided away.

After Talbot's fall De Welcher and the sheriff consulted for a moment, and then decided upon an immediate advance, thinking the defenders of the works would be discouraged by the death of their leader.

"Come on, boys, we've got 'em now!" yelled the official, as he rushed toward the stockade.

Boldly the crowd came on, inspired by the example of the sheriff, although they expected each instant to hear the whizzing of bullets, singing about their ears.

But the stockade was reached and the gates forced open without a sign of resistance.

The defenders had disappeared, and if with their own ears the attackers had not heard the yells of defiance they would not have believed but that Talbot, alone and single-handed, had attempted to hold the fort.

While the sheriff went inside to take legal possession, De Welcher proceeded to examine the body of his foe, followed by a crowd of curious souls, and then came an unexpected discovery.

The boast of the marksman was not made good by the circumstances of the case.

The ball had not pierced the forehead, but had creased the top of the head.

Talbot was not dead, only stunned.

De Welcher thrilled with fierce joy. His enemy was in his hands, a helpless prisoner.

After ordering Talbot to be secured he hurried to the sheriff and explained how matters stood.

"I'm going to put him through a course of sprouts that he will remember to his dying day," the Californian exclaimed. "And, of course, as a sheriff ought not to be mixed up in the affair, you just keep shady until it is over."

The official winked; he had been well paid and was ready to do exactly as De Welcher ordered.

The Californian returned to his prisoner and the line of march was at once taken up for the town.

In the center of the camp, right before the door of the hotel, they halted.

A lynch court was at once organized and De Welcher chosen judge. All had been arranged beforehand.

Talbot had been restored to consciousness, although suffering so severely from the wound he had received that he could hardly stand.

The accusers stood forward, perjured villains, ready to swear to anything, provided they were paid for it.

They swore to all sorts of things. Talbot was everything that was vile, a thief, a gambler—a desperado of the worst kind.

"What have you to say to these fearful accusations?" De Welcher asked, glaring upon the prisoner with eyes that fully revealed how the Californian gloated at the revenge now seemingly within his grasp.

"It is all a foul lie!" Talbot replied, feebly, for he was so weak that he could hardly speak.

"You are my enemy—you have sworn to be revenged upon me—these men are your tools, I am here, helpless, and alone, without a friend to aid me, yet I laugh at your malice!"

Quite a number of the inhabitants of the town had been aroused by this time and had joined the throng in the street, but although many of them believed Talbot to be innocent of the foul charges brought against him, yet De Welcher held the town with so large a force that they did not dare to interfere.

The Californian, fearing that the townspeople might pluck up courage enough to protest against the outrage, hurried matters forward as rapidly as possible.

Assuming a stern aspect, he declared it was the verdict of the court that Talbot was guilty of all the crimes imputed to him, and that such a punishment must be inflicted upon him as would be a warning to all other evil-doers to avoid that section of country.

"This man has gone on in his career of crime unchecked for years," he declared, in conclusion, "and in order to put a stop to his operations, it is the sentence of this court that he be branded on the forehead with a crimson cross, so that wherever he may go in the future, and whatever he may call himself, he may be known and avoided."

"Brand me like a felon!" cried Talbot, infuriated, and struggling, weak as he was, in the grasp of the men who held him.

"Ay, like the felon that you are!" cried De Welcher, in reply. "Strip off his shirt and bind him to yonder tree, and then after he has been branded, he is to receive fifty lashes with a rawhide, and then be turned loose with the warning never to return to this section under pain of death!"

The command was immediately carried out.

Talbot was bound to the cottonwood that stood near the door of the hotel.

Then the executioner made his appearance, bearing the red-hot iron.

De Welcher had given instructions to his tool to heat the brand the moment the trial began.

A shudder of horror passed through the crowd as the executioner approached the helpless man.

Marble-like was Talbot's face as he looked upon the fiery brand.

CHAPTER V.

THE MASKED RIDERS.

"I WILL brand you as my beeves are branded on the Southern plains!" De Welcher cried. "With the brand of the crimson cross upon your face you will never be able to conceal your identity, no matter where you may go or how you may attempt to disguise yourself."

"Better kill me outright, for if I live I will make you rue this deed to your dying day!" Talbot replied, so weak that he could hardly speak, yet defiant and fearless.

"Bah! I laugh at your threats and dare you to do your worst. This moment of triumph at least is mine, and as for the future I am content to let that take care of itself. Executioner, to your work—we fool away time!"

The vile ruffian, who had been bribed by the Californian's gold to perform this dastardly part, but still had sense of shame enough to disguise himself with a mask so that his features

could not be seen, hesitated for a moment, and then, with a sneer, cried out:

"You'll be a beauty arter this!"

The hot iron touched the flesh. Talbot quivered, not with fear, but rage.

A loud "Ah!" came from the crowd, as with almost breathless interest they watched the fearful scene.

Then came a sudden interruption.

Four men on horseback, who had approached unheeded by all, so riveted were the eyes of the spectators upon the tragedy that was being enacted, put spurs to their horses and with a volley from their flourished revolvers dashed in through the crowd, yelling at the top of their lungs.

Each man wore a mask over his features, thus concealing his identity.

The volley was delivered in the most reckless and heedless manner, apparently, yet when the results became visible it was plain that each one of the riders had selected his man.

Eight shots the strangers fired, two apiece, and at the first discharge, the sheriff, who by this time had come upon the scene, the executioner, and the two men who had bound Talbot to the tree, went down, stricken by the whistling balls; the second series of shots—although they were all so rapidly delivered that the eight sounded like one scattering volley—brought to the ground De Welcher and the three men of the crowd who stood the nearest to the prisoner.

The bystanders, upon witnessing this bloody work, were seized with a sudden panic, and without attempting to contest the field with the invaders took to their heels and fled in all directions, one thought only in their minds, and that was to get out of the range of the death-dealing revolvers as soon as possible.

Three of the horsemen deliberately opened fire upon the fugitives, not troubling themselves to take any particular aim, however, evidently not anxious to damage the fleeing men but only to keep them in motion.

The fourth one, a muscular fellow, mounted upon a big roan horse, and whose swarthy hands betrayed his Indian blood, reined in his steed by Talbot's side, and, with a slash of his keen-edged knife, severed the bonds that bound the prisoner to the tree.

Then, by sheer strength, he lifted Talbot from the ground to the saddle, clasping him to his brawny breast with his strong arms.

By this time our hero, overcome by the loss of blood from his wound, and the peril through which he had passed, relapsed into a swoon.

The Indian put spurs to his horse and dashed away, followed by the other three, who, as they galloped onward, proceeded to recharge their pistols.

Neither De Welcher nor the sheriff had received aught but slight flesh wounds, and by the time this movement was accomplished both were on their feet again.

Great was the rage of the Californian when he perceived what had been done.

"A thousand dollars for the recapture of the prisoner!" he cried, "or the same money to the man who kills him!"

"You 'tarnel cowards!" yelled the wounded sheriff, "w'ot are you a-running for like a flock of sheep? Thar's only four in the gang and we've men enough hyer for to eat 'em, body and boots!"

The panic by this time was about over. The hoof strokes of the steeds of the conquerors ringing out sharply on the air told that they were in full retreat, and so the crowd, flourishing their weapons in the air with many a loud word, came back, full of fight now that their opportunity was gone.

"Where's that fellow with the rifle—can't he wing one of these scoundrels?" De Welcher cried.

But the "boss shot," anxious to curry favor with the Californian, who was disposed to "pan out" so well, had been one of the two men who had tied Talbot to the tree, and in payment for that service he had got a revolver ball in his right arm that was certain to put a stop to any target-practice on his part for a month or two.

"No use trying that!" exclaimed the sheriff. "They are too far off. We want hosses—we must organize a party and hunt these rascals to their holes."

"Ay, ay!" cried a dozen voices, quick to approve of the suggestion.

"A thousand dollars, boys, to the man lucky enough to either capture or kill this scoundrel, and if any fellow gets hurt in the fight I will provide for his family, if he's got any!" De Welcher cried. "It's a duty I owe to society to hunt this bloodthirsty outlaw down, and I'm going to do it if it costs me fifty-thousand dollars!"

The speech was received with a round of cheers, for all the gang who had been enlisted by the Californian shouted as in duty bound, and the majority of the inhabitants of the camp who were present followed suit.

True, they had always looked upon Talbot as being a pretty good sort of fellow, but since the current of sentiment seemed to be setting so strongly against him they, after the fashion of the world, went with the strongest party.

Instant search was made for horses. By this

time everybody in the town was on the alert, roused by the noise of the conflict, and great was the wrath of the citizens when it was discovered that the animals bestrode by the rescuers had been stolen from the stage line stables in the rear of the hotel.

As the reader has doubtless surmised, the bold riders were the four stanch pards who had come to hold the fort with Talbot when they learned that an attack was to be made upon him.

Their delay in reaching the scene of Dick's punishment was owing to the fact that it took them some time to secure the horses without alarming the people of the hotel.

Mud Turtle and Bowers had planned the rescue when the discovery was made that Talbot was stunned and not killed.

Desperate and determined as were the four, yet they knew they could not hope to rescue their friend from the hands of his captors unless they could manage to surprise and stampede the crowd, and then, when this was done, means of escape must be at hand, for four could not very well fight forty on open ground.

Then Bowers, by a brilliant stroke of genius, suggested that if they "borrowed" the stage-horses, they could charge into the crowd, scatter them with their revolvers, and then be off with Talbot before his captors could recover from their surprise.

As we have seen, this programme was carried out to the letter.

Great was the rage of De Welcher and the rest when they discovered that the four best horses in the camp had been taken, but the Californian hurried matters forward so speedily by his magnificent promises, that within an hour twenty picked men were provided with animals and started upon the trail, while twenty-five more on foot came on behind.

It was De Welcher's plan to have the horsemen run the fugitives down and hold them at bay until the rear-guard could come up.

De Welcher and the sheriff, despite their wounds, rode in the advance, right behind the tracker.

"It is only a question of time, boys," the Californian declared, as they set out. "Talbot is badly hurt; they can't carry him very far without endangering his life; in an hour or so they must stop, and then we will corral them for good!"

"That's the talk!" cried the sheriff, smarting with the pain of his wound and eager to get a chance to square accounts.

On they rode over the moonlit ground.

The Boss Shot, who was the tracker in the advance, mounted upon a big white mule, his own property, and which he declared could outrun any horse that ever went on shodden hoof, was picking out the trail.

If his statement could be believed he was the greatest tracker that ever hit off a trail, and since he had shown that as a rifle-shot he was "some pumpkins," as he expressed it, his story was credited.

The trail was one that could be easily followed, for the horsemen had ridden straight forward up the road, following the course of the river, without apparently making any attempt to hide their track.

For a half an hour the pursuers pushed on at a good pace, and then they came to a sudden halt.

Owing to the nature of the ground the trail diverged south from the river for a mile, and then came to it again and crossed it by a ford.

At the ford the track of the fugitives was lost. They had entered the water, but no traces of where they had come out could be discovered.

It was the old device; they had either gone up or down the stream and the water had covered the tracks.

Baffled at last, the search was given up; but De Welcher swore as he rode back to the camp that he would never rest until he had sealed Talbot's doom.

CHAPTER VI.

DARING THE TIGER'S CLAWS.

AND now a year later take we up again the thread of our story.

Twelve months have passed by since the events related in our last chapter, and during that time there have been many changes in the camp of Shasta Bar.

With the single exception of the marvelous escape of Talbot, all of De Welcher's plans had been carried out to the letter.

Allcash and Smith, although clearly having right on their side, were forced out of the mining company by De Welcher's clever legal maneuvers.

What could be done against a man who possessed a million or two, and who did not hesitate to use his money to buy both lawyers and judges?

Allcash and Smith had able counsel, but like many other able men they were venial as well.

Through his secret agents the Californian got at the lawyers and bribed them to betray their clients. The judge before whom the case was brought, also had his palm crossed with silver,

and so, to the astonishment of everybody who was not in the ring, De Welcher triumphed.

But like a wise general who believed in the old proverb which says, "Build a bridge of silver for a flying enemy," the Californian did not follow up his advantage and push his foes to the wall. On the contrary, he offered to compromise with them, and they, realizing that if they continued the struggle, the lawyers would be the only ones to make any money, accepted the offer and sold their interest in the mine for about a half of what it was worth.

De Welcher was prompt to follow up this victory by a series of operations in the stock market, intending to "freeze out" the unfortunates who had been weak enough to invest in the shares of the Old Hat Mining Company, and succeeded so well that in a short time he, at a small figure, had secured all the stock that had been put upon the market.

He was now the sole owner of the mine, with the exception of the few shares owned by Colonel Perkins.

These he did not covet because he had succeeded in getting the old man completely under his control.

Perkins was steeped in liquor from morning until night, really had relapsed into a sort of second childhood, and believed De Welcher to be one of the best and noblest of men.

Carlotta clung tightly to her father, using all her powers to counteract the Californian's wiles, but he laughed when the feeble-minded old man told him of the daughter's expostulations.

"My dear colonel," he would reply, "she hasn't got over her crazy liking for that scoundrel of a Talbot, and so her stupid fears must not be heeded. I am your friend and hers, too, if she will allow me to hold that position. In regard to yourself, I have so arranged matters that all the work is taken off your shoulders, and yet you receive a better income from the mine than you ever did before. As for Carlotta, I have determined that she shall become my wife, and of her own free will, too. I am not in the least hurry about the matter. I have accomplished more difficult tasks in my life than bending the will of a thoughtless girl, and in time I feel quite sure she will not only accept my love but crave my forgiveness for having given me so much trouble."

De Welcher plainly revealed his mind in this statement.

Never before in all his life had such an absorbing passion taken possession of him. He had money enough—it wasn't any trouble for him to accumulate wealth, backed as he was by such an enormous capital, but for this child of a girl to defy his power annoyed him, and he had sworn a bitter oath that he would make her accept him as her husband if the accomplishment of the purpose took all the rest of his life.

One obstacle only saw he in the way—the dislike of the girl he counted not, for that was only a foolish whim—and that obstacle was Richard Talbot.

Since the night of Injun Dick's escape he had neither been seen nor heard of, and yet the Californian could not bring himself to believe that his foe was dead.

He feared that the vengeful man, whom he had so deeply wronged, was hovering somewhere in the neighborhood of the camp, ready to deal him a blow when he least expected it.

And then, too, the mystery of Talbot's rescue had never been solved, and that was another strange fact. Four desperate fellows, evidently, or else they would never have dared to do the risky deed.

Were those four men in the camp now, ready to aid Talbot when the time came?

De Welcher believed that they were, and so he surrounded himself with a body-guard, composed of three of the most desperate and determined men he could find; his friends they were supposed to be, and he never stirred abroad without them; and then, in addition, there were twelve picked men, the police of the camp, for the Californian had caused himself to be chosen Alcalde of Shasta Bar, and eight of these men were on the alert both day and night.

With the town so carefully guarded, it really seemed as if it would be a difficult matter for any secret foe to strike a dangerous blow at De Welcher.

The camp had flourished wonderfully since the Californian had entered it. He had spent some fifty thousand dollars in developing the mine; other capitalists had come in his train, and the town had enjoyed what is popularly known as a "boom."

The Quiet House had been purchased by De Welcher, almost entirely rebuilt, and then blossomed forth as the "Grand Pacific Hotel."

The saloon had been fitted up in splendid style, and in the rear part of it was a gambling-room, equal to anything on the coast.

A man could lose his money amid as luxurious surroundings as even San Francisco could boast.

It was really a treat for the miners, after the toils of the day were over, to stroll into the Grand Pacific saloon.

Everybody, that was anybody, was sure to be found there some time between eight o'clock and midnight.

The leading newspapers of the coast, as well as the principal sporting journals, were kept on file, and as De Welcher said, when the place was opened, it was Liberty Hall; every one was welcome, nobody was asked to either eat, drink or play; a substantial lunch was spread punctually at ten each evening and every visitor was free to help himself, whether he spent any money in the house or not.

And although this cost money, for with such lavish expenditure the place could not be expected to pay, De Welcher did not grudge it, for he had really become intoxicated by success. He was a sort of a king in this little valley, and reigned with an absolute hand.

On a pleasant night in June, De Welcher sat in his accustomed seat, surrounded by his satellites.

For the accommodation of the Californian, at the further end of the saloon, a platform had been erected, some three feet higher than the floor, about twelve feet wide, and extending across the whole width of the room; a curtain, running on a wire, was so arranged that it could be drawn across, screening whoever might be on the platform from the rest of the saloon, if it was so desired.

From this post of vantage De Welcher could easily command a view of all that was going on.

The faro table, which was the principal attraction of the place as a rule, was only some twenty feet away from where De Welcher sat, and on the night of which we write the Californian and his friends were amusing themselves by watching the game.

On the platform with De Welcher sat Colonel Perkins, decidedly the worse for liquor, and the three inseparables, who were seldom seen apart, the Californian's body-guard, Tim Benefast, the ex-sheriff, Hickory Burke, who claimed to be the "Boss Shot of the Willamette," and a black-bearded, dark-browed giant of a fellow, whose handle was Oregon Dave, a man with a fearful reputation, a desperado of the deepest dye, and who was commonly believed to have killed more men than he had fingers and toes.

The saloon was well filled, and all the games were going on merrily, when a stranger of such a peculiar appearance, that all eyes were instantly directed upon him, walked up to the faro-table.

He was tall and muscular, with a lion-like head; long, curling locks of golden-red hair floated down over his broad shoulders, and a short, crispy beard of the same hue covered the lower part of his face. A broad-brimmed, high-crowned, white slouch hat was pulled down over his brows. He wore a coat and pantaloons made of buckskin, but cut in the latest fashion, and stained a bright red. A ruffled shirt, in whose bosom sparkled three great diamonds, almost as big as chestnuts, and a pair of patent-leather boots completed his costume.

He was well-armed; the butts of two silver-mounted revolvers peeped out at his waist, and a massive ten-inch bowie-knife was thrust through the belt of untanned leather that girted in his middle.

Approaching the faro table he cast a buckskin bag upon the queen, and inquired:

"What's your limit, pard, for I reckon I want to come into this hyer game?"

The Californian started as though he had been bitten by a snake. The voice sounded strangely to him like the tones of the man he feared, Dick Talbot.

CHAPTER VII.

BREAKING THE BANK.

"THAR isn't nary a limit in this hyer game, my gentle gazelle," replied the faro-dealer, who was no other than our ancient friend, Joe Bowers, but the ragged, disreputable bummer no longer.

He sported a decent suit of clothes now, had even mounted a white shirt, and rejoiced in a clean shave, and yet was still the same old irrepressible, as was of yore, excepting that he managed to keep sober at night when on duty.

"Nary a limit," he repeated. "Me no dook, you kin fire anything down onto this hyer table from a China orange up to a house and lot, and I'll see and climb ye, every time!"

"My stake is in the bag, and I back the queen to win. Do you dare to play without a sight at my plunder?"

"Oh, I bet ye; I reckon I kin meet it if I lose, unless you've got Wells and Fargo's Frisco safe inside of thar; but, I say, who air you, anyway? 'pears to me as if I never run afoul of you afore, anyhowar's!"

"My name is Richard—Red Richard, some folks call me, and as I'm not particular, I had just as soon have that for a handle as anything else."

De Welcher sat and stared. This stranger could not be Talbot, and yet he bore a striking resemblance to the missing man.

The hair and beard might be false, although it did not seem possible, but the forehead of the stranger bore no mark of the "crimson cross."

the brand which the Californian's vengeance had caused to be stamped upon his foe.

Such a mark could not be effaced, therefore this man could not be the party whom the Californian so greatly feared, but for all that, De Welcher took a dislike to him upon the instant.

"Who is this bold chicken that crows so loudly?" he asked, addressing the ex-sheriff, whose business it was to look after all strangers arriving in the camp, he being the chief of police.

De Welcher was so firmly convinced that if Talbot was living, he would some day return for vengeance, that he had instituted in this little mountain camp a spy system that would not have disgraced the city of Paris under the Empire.

"You are too much for me," burly Tim replied, with a shake of the head. "He must have come in since nightfall; the stage arrived on time, just before supper, and he didn't come by her, for I was on hand and saw all the passengers."

"Doesn't it strike you that there is something suspicious about this fellow?"

"Wa-al, yes, he looks like a cuss that would be apt to make trouble if any one attempted to walk over him."

"Say the word, boss, and I'll cut his comb for him so badly that it will stop his crowing for a while," Oregon Dave remarked.

"Go ahead," replied the Californian; "we haven't had any fun for some time."

The black-bearded giant grinned, nodded significantly, and descended to the saloon.

By this time all the players had made their bets upon the game, and Bowers proceeded to deal the cards.

"All ready gents? Now I'm going to let 'er sliver," Bowers exclaimed. "You red-ha'ed feller! you'll feel kinder sick when you see me gather in that leetle bag of yours. Oh, blazes!"

The queen had won—the first winning card out of the box, and Bowers stared at it with an air of comical dismay.

"Say! you hit it, plum-center, fust time, didn't ye, and didn't half try, neither, I s'pose?" he remarked. "Open out your plunder and let's see w'ot I owe ye."

With an air of perfect unconcern, Red Richard emptied the gold-pieces out of the bag onto the table.

"Fifty dollars!" Bowers announced. "Well, pard, that is a very tidy leetle haul. I really reckon that you are in luck to-night."

"But that isn't all," observed the stranger, and he gave the bag to Bowers; "shake out the bag, my friend; 'thus bad begins, but worse remains behind.'"

"Shakespeare, by jingo! and you didn't look as if you had it in you, either!" exclaimed the dealer, as he shook the bag, while all the bystanders came closer to the table, their curiosity excited by this strange circumstance.

But on the face of the Californian appeared a sober look; his instinct warned him that this man was a messenger of evil.

From the bag came a small, folded piece of paper.

Bowers looked a little dubious as he opened it, amid a breathless silence, and then a low whistle, indicative of vast astonishment, came from him as he read the paper.

"Wells and Fargo's receipt for ten thousand dollars!" he exclaimed, and then a low hum of astonishment ran throughout the room.

"You see, you were a leetle hasty in your statement, my friend," the stranger remarked. "Instead of fifty dollars you owe me ten thousand and fifty, and I will be very much obliged if you will be so kind as to hand that trifle over."

"Oh, but this hyer is a skin!" Bowers exclaimed, indignantly. "You kin bet yer bottom dollar that I've tumbled to your leetle game! If you had lost you would have poured the gold-pieces out and said nary word 'bout this hyer receipt for ten thousand!"

"Pardner, you have no right to suppose anything of the kind," the other replied, in the quietest way in the world, yet with a glitter in his dark eyes which would have revealed to any one of sense that he was not a man to be trifled with. "I bet the contents of that bag on the queen. You accepted the bet, without troubling yourself to examine the bag. If I had lost, the plunder was yours, and if you had been fool enough to take the gold without the receipt, so much the worse for you, but since I have won and displayed the contents of the bag, I want to see you put your money up like a gentleman and a scholar; and as to there being anything unfair about the matter, I am willing to leave it to the crowd."

Now while there was hardly a man in the room who did not believe that the stranger had "put up a job" upon the bank, and that if he had lost, the receipt would not have been produced, yet as the paper was in the bag and fairly wagered, by rights the bank ought to pay.

Bowers, gazing upon the crowd, read the decision in their faces before any one had a chance to speak.

"All ag'in' me, eh, pards?" he queried. "You think I ought to pony up? All right, I never go ag'in' the majority," and then, with a doleful air, the dealer made up the sum, which took every cent he had.

"That settles it, pards; see you later," he remarked. "This bank is busted, and we shet up shop until to-morrow night."

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to have spoiled the fun," the visitor remarked, sweeping the spoils with the most careless air imaginable into his pockets, "and as a slight recompense, may I ask you all to take a drink with me and so enable me to pay my footing in the town?"

"Bully for you!" cried Bowers, rising from the table and giving it in charge of the attendants. "I don't bear nary malice and I'll take a bowl with you as quick as with any man in the town!"

"You'll have to make it wine this time, stranger!" exclaimed one of the oldest citizens of the camp. "Any man that kin clean up ten thousand and fifty at a lick can't go back on the sparkling stuff."

"Nary a go-back! Barkeeper, open a couple of baskets, and if that isn't enough we'll have a couple more!" Red Richard exclaimed, chucking a hundred dollars in gold at the presiding genius of the bar.

This liberality caused the crowd to open their eyes. No such "angel" as this had ever struck the town of Shasta Bar before.

The barkeeper hastened to obey the order, the like of which he had never heard since he had come into the Shasta country.

"And never mind the change, young man," continued Red Richard, with the air of a prince, "keep it to grease your boots with, so that you will be able to remember me."

"Bully for you, stranger!" exclaimed the old miner who had previously spoken. "I reckon that you're a clean white man and no mistake."

"A clean white man!" cried Oregon Dave, contemptuously; "wa'al I reckon thar may be two opinions in regard to that!"

"Who trod on you that you yelp so loudly?" exclaimed the stranger, turning upon Oregon Dave with such sudden fierceness that the bystanders instantly fell back, anticipating that there would be trouble.

The bully himself was somewhat astonished. He had expected war—he intended to provoke the stranger into a quarrel when he spoke, but he hadn't any idea that his challenge would be accepted so promptly.

"Look-a-hyer!" growled Dave, as soon as he could recover from his astonishment, "ain't you crowing pretty loud for a strange chicken? Ain't you afeard that I will slap yer face and mash yer 'tarnal jaw for you?"

"Afraid! afraid of such an overgrown, slab-sided, wolf-mouthed ruffian as you are!" retorted the other. "Why, you haven't sense enough to climb a tenderfoot, nor courage sufficient to attack a Digger Injun. If you dare to open your mouth again I'll smack you, just for luck!"

"You will?"

"I will!" and so he did, and then there was the glitter of knives in the air.

CHAPTER VIII.

KNIFE TO KNIFE.

THE combatants were at such close quarters that neither one attempted to use his firearms, but both had drawn their knives, Red Richard being a little the quickest, and also having the slight advantage of possessing the best weapon of the two, it being a couple of inches longer than Dave's knife, better balanced and a far better shape.

The bystanders retreated precipitately, not that they dreaded injury from the knives, but from a fear that the antagonists would resort to their shooting-irons, in which case, as a general rule, the lookers-on always suffer more than the principals.

To use the expressive Westernism: "When men get in their work with knives, thar ain't much monkeying 'bout the picnic."

It was so in this case.

Both of the men meant business and both went in for work as speedily as possible.

The fight did not last half a minute.

Red Richard, being the quickest, drove his knife in Oregon Dave's side, and then, assuming the defensive, parried his antagonist's vicious slash, and, with an adroit movement, so quick and dextrously performed that the eye could hardly follow it, slashed Dave's right wrist open with an ugly cut, six inches in length, running up the arm; then there was a flourish of the blood-stained knife in the air, as if the wielder was cutting the figure eight.

With a howl of pain Oregon Dave let fall his weapon; his good right arm was disabled for many a month; staggering back, he came down all in a heap. The first slash he had received was a terrible wound, although his magnificent constitution had enabled him to stand up under it, but even his iron frame succumbed at last.

The fight was over and the stranger the victor, without a scratch.

The bully, who had been used to rather lord it

over the town, was a pitiful object as he lay upon the ground. Blood was streaming from the wounds in his chest and from his disabled arm, and also from some cuts upon his right cheek, and as the bystanders looked upon the wounded man they understood now what the apparently idle flourishes of Red Richard's knife in the air meant.

Not satisfied with disabling his foe, he had left his "signature" upon his face in a fashion that the bully would wear to his dying day.

In almost breathless eagerness De Welcher had watched the fight from his elevated position, and when Oregon Dave had fallen, so thoroughly whipped, a partly-suppressed groan had escaped from his lips.

"This man is a devil!" he muttered; "at him at once, Tim, you and Willamette, and make an end of him!"

His companions stared, and then they perceived that their master was so carried away by excitement that he was hardly conscious of what he was saying.

"It can't be done," the ex-sheriff replied.

"Blazes, no!" growled the Boss Shot, who had not the least idea of trying conclusions with the stranger after the fight which he had witnessed.

"It is Talbot—Talbot returned to seek vengeance!" the Californian exclaimed.

"Oh, no, it can't be," responded Benefast.

"Oh, no, nary time!" chimed in the other, who not being overburdened with ideas of his own generally made it a point to echo the ex-sheriff's words.

"He's a bigger man than Talbot, 'sides, whar's the scar on his face, the mark of the brand?" continued Benefast. "This fellow ain't got any sich thing, and sich a mark as that can't be got rid of, ye know; it sticks to a man arter it's once put on till his dying day."

"It seems to be impossible, and yet the moment I heard him speak I could have sworn it was Talbot!"

"Yes, his voice is like the other fellow's, but that is all thar is to it, I reckon," said Benefast.

"Yes, yes, that's 'bout the size of it," remarked Willamette.

"Anyway he's a dangerous man, and will be apt to prove troublesome if we do not muzzle him in some way," the Californian observed.

"I don't doubt that at all; but I say, alcalde, if you'll take my advice, when you do git ready to tackle him, fix things so that he won't have the ghost of a show for his money," counseled the chief of police.

While this conversation had been going on the crowd had gathered around the fallen man, under the supposition that he had received his death-wound.

"Come, come, gentlemen, don't crowd in and keep the air away from the man," expostulated the victor in the fight.

"If he's dead w'ot difference does it make?" asked one of the miners.

"Oh, I reckon that he's worth a dozen dead men," Red Richard replied. "I only carved him a little; I didn't try to kill him outright. Such a man as he is ought to be allowed time to repent of his sins before he is snaked into the other world. A doctor will fetch him around in no time."

"Who's talking about a doctor?" asked a tall, thin, sickly-looking man, who at the moment that Red Richard was speaking, came strolling into the saloon.

Instantly a shout rose on the air:

"Hallo, Doc!"

And this seedy, consumptive and decidedly fast-looking individual was the only medical man of whom the camp of Shasta Bar could boast.

Doc Darling, or "Old Pills," as he was rather familiarly called, was a decided character.

He had made his appearance in the camp some three months before; coming in on foot, and presenting every appearance of being dead broke; and in fact he was in that unpleasant state. But hardly had he struck the town when fortune smiled upon him.

Old Lucky Blazee, the principal owner of the Spread Eagle mine, was taken with a fit right in front of the hotel. Old Lucky, having been striking it rich all round, had been living too high—as one of his companions asserted, "fresh meat three times a day was too rich for his blood," to say nothing of throwing in a "cock-tail" every hour or so with some pard, anxious to congratulate him on his good fortune.

Well, the celerity with which the unsavory-looking tramp borrowed a pen-knife and stuck it into the suffering capitalist was a caution; and the result was that old Lucky speedily recovered, and was correspondingly grateful, bestowing a "saw-buck"—as a ten-dollar note is commonly termed by the men who once wore the army-blue—upon his restorer.

"You're a brick!" exclaimed Blazee, emphatically.

"You bet—a regular darling!"

This was the doctor's favorite expression; and that was how he came to be known as Doctor Darling, no one ever taking the trouble to find out his real name; in fact, it is pretty certain that the Doc would have lied if he had been questioned, for, from a few incautious observations that he had let fall during times when he was

well steeped in liquor—the doctor was an inveterate drinker—it was surmised that he had just claim to be a member of that numerous band of pilgrims who had pressing reasons for leaving the home of their youth and fleeing to parts unknown, without taking the trouble to let any one know whither they had gone.

The doctor, upon being informed that his assistance was needed, approached the wounded man, the crowd falling back respectfully.

"Sad accident!" the doctor observed, viewing the victim with a professional eye. "Reminds me of old times in Illinois, when the farmers tackled the mowing-machines and got whipped every lick."

With a sponge, tendered by the bartender, he wiped away the blood so he could examine the cuts.

"This fellow's right fin will never be of much use to him," he remarked.

By this time Oregon Dave had recovered from his faint, and a hoarse growl of rage came from his lips as he listened to this unwelcome intelligence.

"You did this, cuss yer!" he exclaimed, glaring up at Red Richard, who stood near at hand watching the doctor's proceedings. "But I will get square with you for it, and don't you forget it, you blasted red-haired hound!"

"Don't swear, my friend! you will not catch any fish," the doctor remarked.

"And this is all the thanks I get for sparing your life, you mountain of wickedness!" Red Richard exclaimed. "You forced a quarrel upon me with your eyes open, and when I salivated you for all you're worth, you whimper like the whipped cur that you are, instead of taking your punishment as a warning. I spoiled your strong right arm so that it can never be lifted again to oppress those weaker than yourself. I plugged you in the breast so that you will have a close call for life, and that will give you time to think over the errors of the past, and on your cheek I have cut my totem, so that wherever you may go all men who know Red Richard and his signature of blood will be able to tell at the first glance that you have fallen beneath his knife."

"As long as you may live in this world, always on your cheek you will bear the brand of the Crimson Cross!"

The Californian started and grasped the ex-sheriff's arm.

It was true—upon Dave's cheek two knife-cuts formed the cross.

"And now, gentlemen, ta, ta! I'm stopping at O'Glory's Palace, if anybody wants me."

Then, with a graceful bow, Red Richard retreated through the door out into the night.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ALCALDE IS DEFIED.

THE exploits of Red Richard in the Grand Pacific saloon were the talk of the camp next day and more than one long-headed citizen shook his head and sagely remarked that the stranger would have a hard road to travel if he had come into the camp of Shasta Bar with the idea of bucking against Leonard De Welcher.

Of course, his breaking the faro-bank was a feat that might be accomplished by any one plucky enough to essay the task, aided by capital and luck. And as he was a stranger, it was only reasonable to suppose he was not aware that the fellow whom he had whipped so signally was the right-hand man of the alcalde.

A couple of the miners, feeling a decided interest in the daring stranger, talked the matter over and coming to the conclusion that it was a shame for the man to run his head into the lion's mouth without knowing it, took it upon themselves to give Red Richard a gentle hint in regard to how the land lay.

The stranger thanked them for their caution, but laughed to scorn the idea of De Welcher ruling the town.

"Why, what kind of people do you raise up in this region, anyway?" he asked. "This king-pin of an alcalde don't own the town and everybody in it, too, does he? I never heard of such a thing since I was hatched. Such a state of affairs might have existed in the old time down in southern California, when the Spaniards lorded it over the Injun peons, who were nothing better than slaves, but for free American white men to stand any such airs—bah! it is utterly ridiculous."

Both of the Shasta-Barites hastened to repudiate the insinuation.

"Nary slaves!" cried one.

"Not much!" exclaimed the other.

"He's alcalde of the town, and elected by a fair vote," continued the first, "and he has never attempted to do anything out of the way. He's spent a heap of money in the town, and r'ally made things hum, but he's never trodden on anybody's toes as I ever heard tell on."

"Oh, that's so," added the other.

"How about this big mine that he is running?" the stranger asked. "Wasn't there some trouble about that? Didn't he get possession of the property by unfair means?"

Both of the townsmen were embarrassed by this question, and although they attempted to evade it, yet at last they were obliged to admit

that the Californian had used some rather high-handed measures in the matter.

"And this police force of twelve men! What on earth does such a camp as this want with twelve men on the police?"

The miners shook their heads. It was a conundrum and they gave it up.

"But he pays them out of his own pocket," one of them suggested.

"Exactly, and they are his men, prompt, of course, to do his bidding!" exclaimed Red Richard, scornfully.

The miners scratched their heads; they saw that the stranger had decidedly the best of the argument.

"I am much obliged to you, gentlemen, for your kindness in putting me upon my guard," Red Richard continued, "but the caution is needless. I am not at all afraid of your alcalde. While I stay in this camp of Shasta Bar I intend to act just as squarely as I know how. I haven't the least intention of going around trying to step upon other men's toes, nor do I intend that any one shall elbow me too roughly. If I am trodden upon I shall most certainly turn and strike. I believe that is about the right thing, isn't it?"

The miners admitted that as matters went up in the Shasta region the stranger was right, and then they departed. Before noon that day the conversation, greatly exaggerated, was the common property of the town.

It was carried straight to the Californian's ears, and De Welcher, terribly angry, sent for the chief of police in order to consult him about the matter.

Benefast soon arrived. He anticipated why he had been summoned, for he, too, had heard of the bold words of the stranger.

The Californian sat in the alcalde's office, as a small shanty next to the hotel was termed, and his face was dark with anger when the head of the police force entered.

"Have you heard of the loud talk of this Red Richard?" De Welcher inquired, coming to the point at once.

"Oh, yes," Benefast replied, helping himself to a chair.

"Well, what are we going to do about it? The fellow actually defies me, and openly, too. I tell you, Tim, this man has some connection with Talbot. I am sure of it, and that is what brings him here. I thought at first that it was Talbot himself in disguise, but that is not possible, for there isn't the least sign of a scar upon his face."

"Not the least," assented the official.

"And such a mark couldn't be easily gotten rid of, you know," De Welcher continued.

"Not very well; when a man gets a mark like that 'ere crimson cross upon his face it's sure to stay thar until the time comes for him to pass in his checks."

The Californian was silent for a few minutes, busy in thought, then at last an idea occurred to him.

"Say, Tim, how would it do to summon this fellow before me in my capacity as alcalde of the camp and give him a bit of a warning?" he asked. "Tell him that from what I have seen of him I have come to the conclusion he is of a quarrelsome nature and warn him that we don't care to have any bullies or desperadoes locate in our town, and that it is the general opinion the quicker he takes himself off the better it will be both for himself and the camp."

"Kinder warn him that the climate may become unhealthy for him if he don't vamose the ranch?"

"Exactly."

"The idea is a first-class one!" the chief of police exclaimed. "Mebbe he will take the hint and travel when he finds thar's going to be a dead-set made ag'in' him."

And so in accordance with this plan a message was sent to the rather disreputable ranch known as O'Glory's Palace, where the stranger had taken up his quarters.

Red Richard, when informed the alcalde of the town would be pleased to have a few minutes' conversation with him, responded that he would be happy to wait upon his distinguished friend.

The stranger was nothing if not polite.

Ten minutes later he walked into the presence of the Californian, both hands thrust into the pockets of his loose sack coat, as careless and unconcerned as possible.

There was only the alcalde and the chief of police within the room, but six of the police force were lounging around the house within easy call.

The quick eyes of Red Richard had not failed to notice these fellows, all armed to the teeth, and who surveyed him in rather insolent fashion as he approached the house.

To a man at all suspicious the idea would surely have come that he was walking into a death-trap, and Red Richard was suspicious by nature, but he marched into the office with head erect, as proudly as a king going to his coronation, rather than a condemned man to the place of execution.

Within the office was a small desk, behind which sat the alcalde; the chief of police was at his right hand, and there were some half a dozen

chairs scattered around the room, one of which the Californian motioned his visitor to take.

"I have sent for you for the purpose of having a little important conversation," the alcalde began, surveying the stranger with a deal of curiosity, striving to detect if it was really Dick Talbot in disguise.

"I am on deck, sir, every time."

"As alcalde of this camp, I am obliged to say that I regret the little trouble that occurred last night."

"Well, yes, it was rather rough for a citizen of the town to try and jump a stranger in such an unceremonious way, but I taught him a lesson, alcalde; you can bet all your wealth upon it! He will not try to climb another pilgrim for a month of Sundays; in fact, I really doubt if he will ever be fit to keep his end up again in a skirmish. You see, I made up my mind to spoil his right fin for him, and it will take him some time to learn to handle either knife or pistol with his left hand. I know, because I've been thar. I took the trouble to learn because it is a mighty handy thing when a man is in a tight place to be able to use his left duke as well as his right. I can do it, and, really, with either knife or shooting-iron, I would be willing to back my left hand against my right any day."

The Californian scowled, and the chief of police followed suit.

They did not at all admire the free-and-easy way in which this pilgrim from afar assumed that Oregon Dave was in the wrong.

"Well, don't you think you were a little hasty about the matter?" the alcalde asked. "The man you hurt was a good, quiet fellow, and well liked in the camp. His friends will be apt to want to take up the quarrel, and if you know when you are well off, you will get out."

"Not much!" responded Red Richard.

"You will surely be killed if you remain!"

"I'm willing to bet two to one against that."

"You won't stand any show with a dozen at you," the Californian urged.

"And what kind of a camp do you call this, where twelve to one is considered fair play?" demanded the stranger, scornfully.

CHAPTER X.

THE CHALLENGE.

THE arrogant tone in which Red Richard spoke nettled both of the listeners. It really seemed as if the man desired to quarrel; certain it was that in his trouble with Oregon Dave he had met the bully more than half-way, acting upon the old saying that the first blow is half the battle.

"See hyer!" exclaimed the chief of police, thinking that it was about time for him to say something, "you had better not talk so sassy! We don't like folks to go shooting off their mouths quite so loud round this hyer camp."

"Stranger, I am not a man to waste words with anybody," the other replied. "If you want to pick a quarrel with me, you can have it in two wags of a mule's tail. Maybe the fellow I laid up was a friend of yours and you are just hungry for a chance to make dog-meat out of me, and if so be as how you are, just wade in, my noble duke!"

Benefast rose in a passion, his hand on one of the revolvers in his belt, and at the same moment the alcalde grasped a seven-shooter which, concealed from view, was on a small shelf under the desk, convenient to his hand.

But quick as were the two, Red Richard was still quicker.

Up came both his hands from out his pockets, and two heavy derringers were displayed, ugly weapons—pistols carrying an ounce ball, capable of inflicting terrible wounds.

"Go slow—go slow, gentle pard!" he exclaimed. "I hate to do it, but truth compels me to state that I have got the drop on you in the worst kind of a way. These little beauties are self-cockers, and before you can get a bead on me with your weapons, if you really mean business, I'll give you a leaden pill, warranted to cure all mortal ills!"

Both the Californian and the chief of police let go of their pistols as though they had suddenly become red-hot, and sunk back in their seats with a promptitude that was wonderful.

"Hol' on, hol' on!" exclaimed the chief of police; "don't be in such a durned hurry; we ain't anxious to have a fuss with you."

"Particularly when I start in with the advantage on my side, eh?" replied Red Richard, contemptuously.

With a great effort De Welcher mastered the anger which had seized upon him. All through his career he had prided himself upon his *finesse*—upon his ability to get the best of his antagonists by cunning, in cases where it was impossible to use force, and now, by yielding to the blind rage which had been inspired by the insolent stranger, he was merely playing into his hand. An open attack was what the daring intruder invited, but by secret cunning he might be trapped and brought to grief, despite of all his skill.

"Well, well, I suppose we may as well own up that we were rather hasty," the Californian remarked. "But the fact is, stranger, you have a rather impudent way with you, and neither

the chief nor myself are noted for our discretion. If we see a man preparing to slap us, it is only natural for us to try to get in the first whack."

"I can understand that well enough, for it is the game I generally play."

"But in this case there isn't any need of hot words or of angry blows. I sent for you in order to come to an understanding, and, really, there is more benefit for you in such a thing, than for any one else."

"I'm very much obliged to you," but the look in the eyes of the speaker belied his words.

"As alcalde of this camp I try to keep things running as smoothly as possible, and, of course, you must be aware that that row in which you were mixed up last night has caused a good deal of bad blood."

"Oh, I don't doubt it in the least; it would be mighty strange if it hadn't."

"The man that you forced into a quarrel—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Red Richard, "ain't you getting things a leetle mixed? Didn't the fellow force me into a quarrel?"

"You struck the first blow!"

"Certainly! and if I hadn't he would. I was too quick for him from the beginning to the end, and that is all there is to it."

"You may look at it in that way, but his friends don't."

"That is likely, if such a scoundrel as he is has any friends."

"You'll be apt to find out whether he has or not if you stay in this camp much longer," replied the alcalde, meaningly.

"Well, it is my present intention to hold on here until I break the camp or go broke myself, that is if the men of the camp are willing to put up their sugar on the hazard of the die."

"Your life will be in danger every moment that you remain in this valley!"

"I don't doubt it, sir," the warned man replied, calmly.

"And that is the reason why I sent for you. I wanted to warn you. You are a bold man and a good fighter, but there will be too many for you, and if you value your life at all the best thing you can do is to get out."

"Run—run from these cowardly dogs who think to crush me by the weight of numbers!" exclaimed the stranger, in supreme contempt. "Why, alcalde, what kind of a fellow do you take me to be? Bah! if they only dare to attack me when backed by a crowd, I fancy I will not have much difficulty in holding my own against them."

"A willful man will have his own way," the Californian remarked. "You have been warned, and if you choose to remain and face the danger you must not grumble at the consequences."

"I will take my gruel, sir, like a man, no matter how hot it is."

"Of course, as alcalde of the town, I don't like this sort of thing, and I intend to put a stop to all acts of violence if I can, and so I give you fair warning that if there is any trouble in the camp I shall hold the authors of it responsible."

"That is the written law I suppose?"

"It is."

"And the unwritten law is that every man has the right to defend himself, and you can rest assured I am going to do it, and I'm not afraid to trust the men of Shasta Bar to do me justice."

"Well, that is all I've got to say; you have been warned, and if you will not take advice you can only blame yourself if evil comes."

"Is that all?"

"It is."

"Ta, ta, then, I'll see you later," and then, with a courtly bow, Red Richard withdrew.

Hardly had he got out of the building when Hickory Burke, the Boss Shot of the Willamette, made his appearance through the rear door, at which he had evidently been listening.

"Say, alca'de, how much will it be worth if I salivate that cuss?" he exclaimed.

"Five hundred dollars!" replied the alcalde, promptly.

"Five hundred!" exclaimed the Boss Shot, astonished at the magnitude of the sum.

"That's the figure, right down in hard cash the moment the job is done."

"Wa-al, I reckon I'll have to go in for it!" Burke cried.

"This critter is jest old lightning with the knife, and its pooty likely that he knows how to handle his pistols right up to the handle, but when it comes to a repeating-rifle at a thousand yards, why, the odds are big that he don't count for much at that game."

"That is true," remarked the alcalde, "and there isn't much doubt that you can cook his goose for him."

"Go for him, Hickory, and scoop in the five hundred!" advised the chief of police.

"You bet!" repeated the Boss Shot, and then he retreated through the rear door, and set out to find the stranger.

He did not have far to go; for he soon espied Red Richard standing in front of the Grand Pacific Hotel.

Burke, having made up his mind in regard to the best way to provoke the stranger into a con-

test, where he felt sure all the advantage would be on his side, swaggered up to him.

"See hyer; I want to have a leetle talk with you!" he exclaimed.

"Stranger, you couldn't have struck a more accommodating man," replied Red Richard.

"My name is Burke—Hickory Burke, and I'm a pard of the man you had the diffikilty with last night."

"Well, you look to be about as big a scoundrel," the other replied, a fierce glare in his eyes.

"Mebbe you'd like for to pick a diffikilty with me!" cried Burke, rather astonished at the reception.

"Maybe I would; how do you like it? Shall I pull your nose, slap your face, or—"

The Boss Shot stepped back at this sudden outbreak, and some of the townsmen who had been attracted to the neighborhood by the threatening demonstration came to the conclusion that a man more ready to quarrel than this red-bearded stranger had never appeared in the camp of Shasta Bar.

"Hol' on, I want a squar' fight an' no mistake!" cried Burke. "Kin you shoot?"

"I can—anything from a ten-pounder down to a pop-gun."

"Do you dare to face me with a repeating-rifle at a thousand yards?"

"I do!"

"I'm your mutton, then! a thousand yards, and as many shots as there are bullets in our rifles."

"That suits me exactly; and after the signal each man is at liberty to advance."

"All right!" and the Boss Shot grinned, for this seemed to give him the advantage.

"Any position we please?"

"Yes; that's all right."

Seconds were at once chosen, and by the time this was done about all the inhabitants of the town were in the street to see the fight.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOSS SHOT IS ASTONISHED.

THE road by the river, just above the camp, was selected for the battle-ground.

Tim Benefast acted as second for Burke, while Richard had picked out the old gray-haired, gray-bearded miner, who had spoken to him in the Grand Pacific Saloon the night before, Long John Scott, as he was commonly called.

While the seconds were measuring the ground Red Richard went to his hotel after his rifle, and when he appeared with the tool, Burke's under-jaw dropped.

It was a Winchester of the latest pattern, and though perfectly plain, being free from all ornament, yet it looked exactly like the gun that a first-class marksman would possess, and the Boss Shot mentally asked himself if he hadn't made a mistake in this matter and caught a Tartar.

But it was too late to back out now; the dance had begun, and the only question left to be decided was who should pay for the music.

The distance was measured, and the antagonists took their places.

Joe Bowers had volunteered to give the signal, and had been accepted by both parties.

The conditions were that the men should stand facing each other and leaning upon their rifles.

A single pistol-shot was to be the signal for active operations.

A thousand yards is a long distance, and expert, indeed, must be the shot who could hit a target no bigger than a man at such a range.

"Now then, me bold boyees, let'er rip!" cried the irrepressible, as he discharged the pistol.

Down dropped both men simultaneously, the Boss Shot kneeling upon one knee and bringing his rifle up with careful aim, but Red Richard completely disconcerted his antagonist by falling at full length upon his face and taking aim in that position, thus presenting one of the most difficult shots possible.

Burke, conscious that he was decidedly at a disadvantage, became nervous, uncertain what to do. Nearly all his rifle practice had been at a stationary target, and he was not used to the tricks of the prairie hunter.

While he hesitated, Red Richard fired. The shot was an excellent line one, but a miscalculation about the elevation carried it just over Burke's head; two inches lower and it would have pierced his brain.

As the ball whistled by him, his short, brush hair fairly stood on end, and he lost no time in changing his position, for he felt satisfied that a second shot would be more successful, now that his adversary had him gauged.

Burke sprang to his feet and moved some twenty feet to the right, and about ten feet in advance of where he had been.

The Boss Shot was pale and his nerves were decidedly unsettled. He had been caught in his own trap; he had relied upon his skill as a marksman to slay his antagonist at a distance without giving him a chance for his life, but now the single shot, and the clever maneuver that had preceded it, revealed to him that he was opposed to a man who was a better shot than himself at a thousand yards, and he cursed

the folly and greed which had led him into this dangerous position.

Red Richard imitated the example of his antagonist and rose to his feet, but instead of remaining motionless he advanced with rapid steps, but in an uncertain zig-zag course, so as to render it a difficult matter for the other to get a shot at him; there could be no dwelling on the aim; only a snap-shot could be taken.

A dozen times Burke drew a bead on his foe as he came on, and then before he could pull the trigger the erratic movement of the other rendered the aim worthless. At last, in despair, when Red Richard was within five hundred yards, he pulled the trigger.

The cunning tricks of the stranger, though, had had their effects, and the ball whistled wide of its mark; and almost immediately Red Richard discharged his piece.

With a yell of pain the Boss Shot dropped his weapon. The ball had taken effect in his right arm, shattering the elbow.

"He'll have to get another name than the Boss Shot of the Willamette hereafter," the victor exclaimed, "for, unless I miss my guess, that right arm of his will never fool around a rifle again."

"Wot the blazes is the matter with you?" the chief of police exclaimed, approaching his principal. "You've dropped your we'pon like it war red-hot!"

The two were at such a distance from the bystanders that the conversation could not be overheard by any one.

"Matter enough," the other replied, with a dismal groan, "the cuss has put an end to my shooting for good and all, I reckon. I've got it in my right arm— Oh! Tim, if you don't git squar' with this fellow for this you are no friend of mine."

"Oh, I'll do it! you kin bet your bottom dollar on that! I'll git squar' with him before he is a month older, or my name ain't Tim Benefast!"

"Bind up my arm and send for the doctor; I'm gitting faint! Oh, cuss the luck! I thought I could play him without getting nary scratch," and as he spoke he was compelled to lean upon his friend's shoulder.

"Tim!" shouted Bowers; "come up to the mark and take your gruel like a man!"

"Count him out!" replied the chief of police. "He's plugged; no more in his'n to-day."

"The matinee is over then, gents," and Bowers made a bow to the spectators. "Pardner, the game is yours," and he addressed Red Richard. "T'other cuss has cashed in his checks and pulls out for repairs. Say, ain't it 'bout time you called for drinks for the crowd for to celebrate this picnic?"

The eager look upon the faces of the bystanders clearly showed that they considered this a most excellent idea, and Red Richard, who, as one of the lookers-on remarked, seemed trying to make himself "solid" with the boys, was quick to improve the hint by inviting everybody to adjourn with him to the Grand Pacific Saloon and there imbibe at his expense.

And after this ceremony was over Red Richard gracefully begged to be excused and retired, leaving behind him the unanimous impression that he was as fine a man as ever struck the camp of Shasta Bar, and that if he continued as he had begun, he would be an honor to the town.

The alcalde had been one of the witnesses to the defeat of the Boss Shot, and at the end of the contest had withdrawn to his office a prey to the most violent rage.

Benefast, after seeing the wounded man safely bestowed, sought his chief.

"Well, Tim, doesn't the most infernal luck cling to this fellow?" De Welcher exclaimed, as his satellite entered.

"Right you are, governor!"

"What does the doctor say about the wound?"

"Burke's right arm will never be any good to him."

A bitter curse came from the lips of the alcalde.

"That makes two of my best men that this infernal scoundrel has disabled!"

"Yes, Oregon Dave, who used to boast that he never met his match with the knife, will never be able to handle one again, and now the Boss Shot is fixed so that he will pull nary more triggers."

"Doesn't it seem to you that there is more than mere chance about these affairs?" the alcalde asked. "How comes it that this unknown quarrels with my two best men and manages to disable them?"

"Wa-al, they kinder egged the fuss on themselves, you know. Both on 'em were eager to oblige you and wipe out the stranger, not calculating that thar was a chance for 'em to git the worst of the deal. Of course the cuss met 'em more than half-way. In fact, in all my experience—and I have seen some pretty rough times since I came west of the great Rockies—I never yet met a man so durned eager to git into a fight as this hyer red-haired galoot; 'pears to me as if he was jest sp'iling for a fuss all the time."

"It certainly looks like it. See, Tim, I've

rather been under the impression that I run this camp."

"Wa al, that's so; thar's no two ways 'bout that, nohow you kin fix it!"

"If this fellow goes on as he has commenced—"

"Yes, I see! I reckon he'll run the town."

"Exactly, and a stop must be put to it at once. Tim, you're the man for the job."

"No, I ain't!" cried the ex-sheriff, hastily. "None of it in mine, thank you! Why, see hyer, alcalde, this cuss is a terror, he is! a regular screamer and no mistake! In all your life did you ever see or hear of a man using a knife as this feller kin? Why, Oregon was as good a man in that line as I ever run across, but this cuss salivated him and didn't half try, either, and then with the rifle—do you know anybody that could be hired to stand up for to shoot with him after this day's work? If you do, I don't, and tharfore I say, none of it for me."

"You are an expert pistol-shot—"

"I reckon I am, but I ain't going to try this critter on that tack. Governor, take my advice and bushwhack him; git six or eight to jump on him by night, and then it's even betting but what he will clean the hull gang out."

"That is a good idea and I will act upon it, for while this man lives I feel that I am in danger."

And then the two set their wits to work to devise a scheme that could not fail.

CHAPTER XII.

A MESSAGE.

THE O'Glory Palace, where Red Richard had taken up his abode, was a small concern, situated on the edge of the town. The proprietor was a young Irishman who had been badly hurt in one of the neighboring mines and when he recovered, being unable to do any hard work, the "boys" clubbed together, raised a "stake," and set honest Mike O'Glory up as a saloon-keeper.

The stranger had selected O'Glory's Palace as a head-quarters for the reason that it was isolated, had no regular boarders, and he would be free from all scrutiny.

O'Glory, who kept bachelor's hall, had at first been reluctant to receive the stranger, but when the applicant planked down a twenty-dollar gold-piece and assured the Irishman he was prepared to pay liberally for his entertainment, O'Glory, who had hard scratching—as the miners said—to get along, began to look upon him in the light of an angel in disguise.

And apart from the money that he paid, an excellent thing it was for O'Glory's Palace when the stranger took up his quarters there, for after his exploits in the Grand Pacific Hotel there was a constant rush of people to the obscure saloon, eager to get a look at the hero of the hour.

As the proprietor remarked to his guest on the evening of the day that succeeded the one on which he had made his advent in the town:

"Upon me wourd, it's glad I am that I made up me mind to resave yeas' inter me mansion. Faith! I've taken in more money to-day than I did for the last month, all put together, do ye mind?"

"Make hay while the sun shines," was Red Richard's counsel. "There's no telling how long you'll have me here. I'm rather inclined to be quarrelsome, and some of these sharps may wipe me out."

"Be the Rock of Cashell!" O'Glory cried, "the spalpeens won't do it whin I'm to the fore, or else there'll be blood on the moon!"

The new-comer laughed. He saw that the speech came from the heart and felt that he could trust the Irishman.

"If I can get anything like a fair show, there isn't much doubt I can hold my own. But if I get in trouble, you may be mixed up in it, if you harbor me here."

"Upon me wourd it's proud I'd be for to stand up wid ye ag'in' yer inimies!" the Irishman declared.

There was truth in the man's face, and Red Richard felt satisfied that his host could neither be bought nor terrified into acting against him.

The stranger's victory over the Boss Shot brought a fresh run of custom, and O'Glory's Palace became one of the best-paying "she-bangs" in the camp.

It was noticed, though, that none of the police nor any of the noted friends of the alcalde ever came near, and soon it was whispered around the town that the Californian did not admire the bold stranger, and quiet bets were made on the sly that there would be trouble between Red Richard and the alcalde before long.

The Californian was known to have an intense dislike for "chiefs," as the bold boys from afar, who came in once in a while with the idea of running the town, were fond of terming themselves, and on a dozen different occasions the police of the camp had "gone" for the pilgrims in a way that they despised, and so since De Welcher had become the alcalde of the town no

loud-mouthed boaster had been permitted to lord it over the camp.

Red Richard could hardly be classed with these vociferous gentlemen, although he had signally proven his right to the title of chief, but in both of his encounters he could not in truth be called the aggressor, and the wise men of the town were speculating how the alcalde would contrive to get at him, so long as he kept within the bounds of the law.

In the mining-regions the law of self-defense is universally recognized, and if two men quarrel and then resort to weapons to settle the dispute, so long as the fight is conducted fairly, no blame is attached to the victor in the struggle, although he may have killed his antagonist.

"The alcalde will trap him, though," more than one long-headed citizen remarked. "It ain't in natur' for him to like this stranger pilgrim for to come in and climb the best men in the town; he'll never stand it, nohow, and as he's a mighty cunning cuss he'll find some way to cook Red Richard's goose."

And so the town waited, almost with bated breath, as one might say, eager to see the result of the struggle between the powerful alcalde and the unknown and friendless stranger.

But on the surface none of this appeared. The Californian went about his business as usual, and the stranger amused himself by killing time in the ordinary fashion.

Three days passed away without the slightest ripple of excitement.

On the afternoon of the third day, just as the twilight of the evening hour was stealing over the earth, a stone, to which a letter was attached, was thrown in through the upper front window of O'Glory's Palace.

The palace, for all its high-sounding name, was but a small shanty, built of slabs, a story and a half high. Two apartments only in it, the saloon on the ground floor, and an open garret over the saloon, with a small window in each end.

This had formerly been O'Glory's bedroom, but since the arrival of his guest he had given up the entire apartment to him, and fitted up a bunk for himself down-stairs under the bar.

Access to the garret was only to be had by means of a small ladder affixed to the side-wall and a trap-door; and that was one reason why the quarters suited Red Richard so well. It was almost impossible for him to be taken by surprise.

As there wasn't anything particular going on in the camp during the afternoon, it was the custom of the stranger to remain within doors—and take a siesta.

Both of the windows were open, and the occupant of the apartment reclined upon his rude bunk when the stone came in through the casement.

Not understanding what it was, and alarmed by the noise, believing that it presaged danger, Red Richard jumped from the bed and grasped his revolvers, and then, despite the dimness of the light, he perceived the letter rolled around the stone, and understood that some one had taken this strange method of communicating with him.

"A warning to leave the camp within four-and-twenty hours, probably," he remarked, replacing his pistols in his belt, and picking up the letter.

It only contained two lines, traced evidently by a woman's hand, no address and no signature.

"Meet me to-morrow morning, at ten, on the Cinabar City road, a mile from town."

Red Richard examined the writing carefully, a faint perfume came from the paper, although it was but a common sheet of commercial note.

A low sigh came from his lips; it was not the first time that peculiar odor had fallen upon his senses.

"This may be a trap, but I doubt it, and I most surely will keep the appointment," he murmured.

And then he bethought him of trying to ascertain who had thrown the stone through the window.

Hastening to the casement he looked out; not a soul was in sight, and the only trace of any living thing that he could discover was, he fancied the gentle breeze brought to his ears the sound of a horse's hoofs dying away in the distance, and then he remembered that just before the stone had made its appearance, some one on horseback rode by the house.

"It was an ingenious way of conveying the message to me without danger of being betrayed, if it was the party I suspect, in person, as I have no doubt it was," he mused.

That night Red Richard again astonished the town.

He dropped into the Grand Pacific Saloon about eleven o'clock.

There had been some high play at the faro-table that evening and the "tiger" succeeded in scratching pretty severely all who had been rash enough to dare its claws.

Bowers, for a wonder, seemed flushed with the success that had attended the "bank," and as Red Richard drew near he saluted him:

"You are jest the very man w'ot I've been a-looking arter! Say, don't you want to try your luck to-night? We're jest in on a fresh deal, and I reckon this hyer crowd is pretty near cleaned out. They were a-slinging tens and twenties down onto the keards pretty lively a spell ago, but that sort of fun seems over now, and the best on 'em are skeered to risk over a fiver. Come, take a whack at it, jest for luck! Astonish my aged eyes with a fifty-dollar bet! make me howl with joy by slinging a hundred dollars' worth of chucks down on some of these pretty picters!"

"Oh, don't talk about hundreds! When I play I play for thousands!" Red Richard replied, while all the rest stared at the bravado.

"Thousands it is, me noble dook!"

"How much have you got to lose to night; how big a pull can the bank stand?"

"Thirty thousand dollars, great satrap!"

"Here's a trifle then, on my beauty, the queen."

And from his pockets the bet or drew nugget after nugget of pure and virgin gold, until he had five thousand dollars' worth piled on the table.

"Say!" cried Bowers, astonished at this display, "has anybody located and staked you out yet? Hang me if you ain't a walking gold-mine!"

And in truth, such a display of nuggets, so pure, so beautiful, the camp of Shasta Bar had never seen before.

"No chance for you, pard, but there's my wealth on the queen to win!" Red Richard replied.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIGH STAKES.

"FIVE thousand on the queen to win!" repeated Bowers. "Waal, now, you hit me exactly whar I live! That's the kind of play I like. When a man slaps down five thousand chucks to onc't it shows that he means business, every time. But I say, ain't any of the rest of you pilgrims going to come in? I don't want to start the game with only a single bet on the table."

And he smiled, alluringly, upon the bystanders as he spoke; but luck that evening had run so decidedly in favor of the bank that the gamblers, a most superstitious set, were decidedly shy.

"Oh, come, gentle friends, once more unto the breach!" Bowers implored, after a pause, perceiving that no one went down into his clothes after a stake.

"If you're all broke, darn me if I won't lend you a thousand or two jest to make the thing interesting!" and Bowers looked about him with the air of a millionaire.

"Bully for me!" ejaculated a shrill voice, and the speaker, who was no other than our old friend Washee-Washee, Lee Sing, forced his way through the crowd to the table. "Melican man big thing on ice! Me takee t'ousand—two, thlee, allee same, every time, you bet, hoop la!"

There was a roar of laughter at this outburst, for the heathen was evidently in dead earnest, for with outstretched hand and a "smile that was childlike and bland" he stood by the table.

"Hallo, John, is that you?" exclaimed the dealer, not at all disconcerted by the prompt acceptance of his offer.

"You bet—how much you 'see' me, eh?" and he grinned in the face of the other.

"John, it makes me heart r'ally bleed for to have to say it, but you are barred out—you can't come in—the laws prohibit it—no Chinamen are allowed. If you was a white man now I would chuck five or ten thousand dollars at you so quick that it would make your head swim!"

"Too thin—no washee!" responded Lee Sing, sententiously. "You no flaid to let me bet—you flaid to lend me cashee."

"Waal, I'm skeered of your luck, John; if you should bet, you'd bu'st the consarn for sure!"

"Me go five t'ousand dollee on queen, allee same a 'Melican man!" And with a vicious air the Chinaman slapped down a huge roll of bills by the side of Red Richard's gold.

The heathen was well-known to be a most desperate and determined gamster, but this bold bet was a little ahead of anything that he had ever been known to do.

Bowers counted the money, pronounced the "John's" statement correct in regard to the amount and then appealed to the crowd to make their "game."

"Come, gen'lemen, can't wait all night, you know, and although thar is money enough on the board to satisfy any reasonable man, yet as it is all on one keerd a few bets, even if they were only small ones, on some of the other papers would kinder make the thing interesting."

"Durn my cats! if I don't take a whack at you!" cried a stentorian voice, and The-Man-from Red Dog elbowed his way through the bystanders up to the table. "I reckon it's about time that the luck should change, anyhow! This blamed, miserable old faro bank has jest been a-scooping things a leetle too long, and I'm jest the boyee for to wade in and climb it for all it is worth!"

Then the red-bearded giant "went for" his wealth.

First he planked a silver dollar on the table and the crowd snickered.

"Oh, shet yer mouths, or ye'll catch cold!" he cried. Then from one of his boots he produced a small bag of gold-dust, which only panned out five dollars in the scales.

"That sees t'other cuss and goes him four better!" he remarked.

From the other boot he fished up another buckskin bag full of little gold scales—flake-gold, as it is commonly termed. This weighed out a hundred dollars, and an audible "Ah!" resounded through the room.

His next move was to produce from a secret pocket in the inside of his shirt a roll of bills, and when this was counted it was found that he had just an even five hundred dollars on the table.

"Thar, that I reckon is a respectable bet for any gentleman in Californy to make, but I ain't through yit," he continued, and then from some secret hiding-place in the waistband of his pantaloons he brought forth a solitaire diamond ring of such size and beauty that an involuntary exclamation of astonishment came from the lips of all.

"Aha! feast yer eyes on that sparkler, ye cripples!" the big fellow cried. "That 'ere is worth five hundred of anybody's money, I reckon!"

Bowers, who in his time had seen a great deal of life, was about as good a judge of diamonds as could be found on the Pacific slope, and taking the ring he examined it with a critical eye.

"Well, pard, how does she pan out?" asked the giant.

"I'll give you five hundred for it and glad of the chance," Bowers replied.

"Oh, I ain't a-selling, rocks, but if you're willing to call it five hundred, I'll put it with the rest of the plunder, and that will fetch my ante up to a clean thousand," and he deposited the ring with the rest of the valuables.

"All right, sir, I'll see you for a thousand, and that is the kind of man I am!" Bowers declared. "What card will you put it on?"

"Waal, as I think it is good policy to allers foller a good lead, I reckon I'll have to put her on the queen, 'cause these hyer two gents hain't got any objection to let my leetle thousand slide in with their big piles," and he nodded to Red Richard and the Chinaman.

"Oh, no; this is a free country, pardner, and if the queen wins I reckon the bank will be a heap sight more willing to pay your stake than mine."

"Onee t'ousand good, fivee t'ousand better, Chinaman take one no get t'other; savey, 'Melican man?" observed Lee Sing.

"And by the by, why don't you run your pile up to five so as to make an even thing of it, and kinder make the old bank squeal when the queen runs out a winning card?" suggested Red Richard.

"Stranger, I'd do it in a min'tel! I've got all the confidence in the world, but I hain't got the dust round 'bout my clothes jest now," the Red-Dogite responded. "The fact is, I've jest bought a half-dozen gold mines and I'm a leetle short of cash, this evening."

"Oh, well, if you're short, I'll stake you," and then from an inner pocket of his coat Red Richard drew out a thick wad of bank-notes—"big as a brick," as one of the bystanders remarked in an audible whisper, and counting out four thousand dollars threw them, in the most careless and indifferent way on the table in front of the red-bearded giant.

"There you are, pard; now go for 'em," he remarked.

"Much obliged, stranger, I'll do as much for you one of these days," Dandy Jim returned.

"Don't mention it, glad to accommodate you; always call on me when you want money when I am in town. I like men with red hair, because they are uncommonly good-looking, as a rule," and he caressed his own auburn locks.

A laugh followed this sally.

The giant placed his wealth by the side of the others, so that the queen was surrounded on three sides by five-thousand-dollar piles.

All within the room had crowded as near to the table as they could get by this time, neglecting everything else, for it was not every night that such a duel could be witnessed.

De Welcher, on the platform, surrounded by a knot of his friends, looked grave. There were now fifteen thousand dollars bet on the queen, and if that card should happen to win, it would be a serious loss.

"Curse the fellow!" the muttered of the chief of police, who was seated at the table by his side. "He broke the bank the other night, and I have an idea that he means to repeat the operation again, if he can."

"Mighty unlikely, boss," Benefast remarked. "Lightning isn't apt to strike twice in the same place."

"Very true, but the fellow seems to have the fiend's own luck!"

"Fifteen thousand won't burst the bank?"

"No, it will stand twice as strong a pull as that. The odds are that he will get skinned to-

night, and that will be revenge for what happened the last time he was here."

"Fifteen thousand dollars on the board, gents, and every cent bet on the queen," Bowers commented. "Now thar's jest one leetle top place hyer, whar thar's room for some bold and well-heeled galoot to slap down another five thousand, so as to make an even thing of it. Whar's the man?"

"Me go five t'ousand!" exclaimed a guttural voice, and a stalwart figure forced his way through the throng to the table and cast a canvas-bag with a dull thud upon the board.

"Five t'ousand—nuggets—in bag!" exclaimed the Indian, Mud Turtle.

CHAPTER XIV.

"GOING FOR THE BANK."

THIS had been a night of surprises, but the appearance of the Indian with his bag of gold was the greatest of them all.

The red skin was a stranger; none of the miners had ever seen him in Shasta Bar, although some of them, who had dwelt years before in Cinnabar City and Yreka, recognized him as an old acquaintance.

Hungry, wolfish eyes glared at the Indian as he opened the canvas bag and poured the nuggets into the scales.

They were nearly all small, about the size of marbles, and from their peculiar appearance all the experienced miners present understood that they had been gathered from some mountain "pocket," where they had been subjected to the action of rapidly running water.

One of the oldest legends common to the Pacific slope is that there are vast mines in the mountains, of wonderful richness, the exact location of which is kept a profound secret by the red-skins, the information being handed down from father to son, with urgent injunctions never to betray the secret to the intruding white men.

And so, when the Indian produced his wealth, all of the crowd felt sure that he had been helping himself to the treasures of one of these secret mines, and a dozen of the bystanders at once formed the resolution to cultivate the acquaintance of their copper-colored brother as soon as possible, with the idea that in an unguarded moment the precious secret might leak out.

"Kerreck!" exclaimed Bowers, after he had finished weighing the gold. "Jest about five thousand dollars' worth of plunder. Red-skin, if you have got any more of this glittering dross 'bout yer clothes, I shall be obleeged if you'll tell me which way you calculate to go home, so that I kin lay in wait for you with a club."

There was a general laugh at this remark, but the Californian did not join in the merriment.

There were now twenty thousand dollars upon the table, and all wagered upon the queen. It was a large sum, and if the game went against the bank it would come pretty near to breaking it, and this was why De Welcher looked grave.

The stranger had broken the bank once, and evidently intended to repeat the operation if he could. But luck had been running so strongly in favor of the bank all the evening that De Welcher had confidence the twenty thousand would be "gathered in" to his coffers.

"Now, gents, it's yer last chance to win a farm!" exclaimed Bowers, placing his hand upon the dealing-box. "Game all made?"

There wasn't any response, for the bystanders were all too anxious to see the result of this big play to care about risking anything themselves upon the hazard of the die.

"Hyar she goes, then!"

There wasn't a head in the room but what craned eagerly forward, anxious to watch the result.

Totally unmoved—the coolest man in the room—Bowers "slipped" the cards; out they came, and the first "face" card visible was a queen, and on the winning side.

A prolonged "ah!" arose from the lips of the crowd, while a smothered curse escaped De Welcher.

"Did you ever see such infernal luck as this fellow has?" he muttered to Benefast.

"He must be Satan's own chicken!" was the reply of the ex-sheriff.

Bowers glared at the queen for a moment and then a comical expression passed over his face.

"Waal, boys, I reckon that this hyer bank is twenty thousand dollars poorer than it was a minit ago, but sich is life!"

Then he proceeded to pay over the money, and when this operation was performed, the bank only had about ten thousand dollars in its strong box.

"We ain't quite bu'st yet, gents," the dealer remarked. "We are still keeping open house, so make your game, pardners, if you please."

"The queen suits me well enough, so let my plunder stay right where it is. I go ten thousand on the queen to win," said Red Richard.

"When a man strikes out a good lead, I'm jest the antelope fur to foller him until the last cuss is hung," observed The-Man-from-Red-Dog. "I'll

go my leetle ten thousand that the queen will win ag'in!"

"Me, too, allee same a 'Melican man!" exclaimed the Heathen Chineese. "Tenee t'ousand dollee, queenum win, you catchee me on?—how high, bully fol me, you bet, hoop-la!"

Lee Sing's "United States" language was a little mixed, as one of the bystanders remarked, but for all that his meaning was perfectly plain.

There were now thirty thousand dollars bet upon the queen, and all eyes were turned upon the Indian, anxious to see what he was going to do.

"Mud Turtle go ten thousand on queen," observed the savage, with stolid dignity. "That is the kind of hair-pin that the Blackfoot chief is made of—all down but nine; set 'em up ag'in!"

The fat under-jaw of Bowers dropped as he surveyed the field of action.

Forty thousand dollars bet on the queen to win and the bank only had about ten thousand in its cash-box.

"Waal, gents, I don't r'ally see how we air going to make the rifle this time," he remarked. "The spirit is willin' but the flesh is weak. I've only got 'bout ten thousand chucks to fall back on, and if you should happen to scoop me for the leetle forty thousand, I reckon it would take some pooty tall figuring for to stretch the ten so as to cover it."

"I thought this was the bank that always boasted that it had no limit!" Red Richard exclaimed, jeeringly.

"Right you air, pard, right you air!" Bowers replied, with a mournful shake of the head. "Ag'in you take hold on me whar the ha'r is short. But, stranger—I'm giving it to you as straight as a string—'tain't every day that pilgrims walks in hyer and slaps it at us to the tune of twenty thousand ducats a lick."

"Well, if the bank makes a clean back-down—" Red Richard remarked, scornfully, but was interrupted by the angry voice of the Californian.

"The bank does not back down!" he cried.

"On the contrary, the bank will play you for every cent that you and all your pards can scare up, and keep on at it for a month if you like! You might as well try to scare the Bank of California as this hyer institution! Bring me pen and ink," and De Welcher drew out his check-book.

"I broke the concern the other night, and I reckon I can do it again!" the sharp retorted.

"Lightning seldom strikes twice in the same place," remarked De Welcher, contemptuously, as he filled up a couple of checks. "You managed to get away with some of my plunder the other night, but I reckon I'll get it back, and with interest, before you get out of this house this evening."

"Some other evening—good-evening," hummed Bowers, softly.

"There is a check for thirty thousand dollars," continued the Californian; "that, added to the amount you have in the cash-box enables you to 'see' the bets now on the table, and here's another check for eighty thousand dollars, which I think will be enough to keep the game going for another hour or two."

And in the most careless manner possible, the alcalde tossed the two slips of paper to Bowers.

"Trying a little bluff game now, eh, alcalde?" quoth Red Richard. "But I reckon that any way you take me, you'll find that 'Jack is as good as his master.' Drive on your hearse, Mr. Dealer, and give us a sight for our money!"

Out came the cards, a dozen or so, no queen among them, and a breathless silence reigned, so intense that the slight noise made by the cards as they were dealt could be distinctly heard all over the room.

A few more cards and then the queen of diamonds showed her smiling face.

The "bank" was forty thousand dollars poorer.

A long breath and then Red Richard's mocking laugh.

"Let my twenty thousand stay right where it is on the queen!" he cried. "She has been gracious enough to smile on me twice, and I'll risk my ducats that she will be good enough to show me her pretty face on the winning side for the third time. Alcalde, I'm right hot for that eighty thousand dollars, and then I'm game enough to go you for a hundred and sixty thousand if you dare to put the money up!"

"Let her rip—I'm in, make or break!" cried The-Man-from-Red-Dog.

"Me too, allee samee 'Melican man!" exclaimed Lee Sing, although his fingers worked convulsively to clutch the fortune he had gained so easily.

"Big thing on ice," remarked the Indian; "scalp white man's bank, red-hot!"

The four winners had faith enough in their luck to let their gains remain on the successful card.

The odds, mathematically considered, were about a million to one that the queen would lose. But what does the blind goddess care for paltry man's scientific calculations?

The queen came forth a winning card for the third time.

De Welcher was a hundred and forty thousand dollars poorer.

"Gents, this bank is bu'sted!" Bowers exclaimed, sadly.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER DARE.

SILENCE reigned supreme for a few moments while Bowers, with the aspect of a man who was going to be hung, pushed the checks over.

Red Richard undertook the division of the money.

There were a hundred and sixty thousand dollars on the table; twenty thousand—five thousand each—which the four players had started with and the balance the amount won from the bank, so that each man was entitled to forty thousand apiece.

"Now then, partners, this gentleman"—and he placed his hand on the shoulder of the Red-Dogite, "and myself will take the check for eighty thousand, which we can divide when we cash it, and the balance will give you two the share to which you are entitled."

All nodded assent.

Red Richard made the division.

"Now that's fixed," he remarked. "I believe I heard you remark that the bank has suspended," he continued, with a graceful bow to Bowers.

"Pardner, when you git knocked down for a hundred and forty thousand dollars, I reckon you will have sense enough to lie still."

"If the bank is satisfied I am, but I am the kind of man that always wants to do the square thing, and if the bank is hungry for a chance to get hunk I'm perfectly willing to give it another go. I reckon these gentlemen, who have been so kind as to follow my lead so far, will chip in again too."

"You bet!" cried Dandy Jim.

"Me too!" exclaimed the Chinaman.

"Injun, bully boy—it is a left day when he gets cold!" remarked Mud Turtle, with imposing dignity.

"You see we're all of one mind. Now we are just the kind of men to play the square white game every time. We'll put the hundred and sixty thousand dollars on the queen to win the fourth time if the bank dares to meet the stake!"

De Welcher had sunk back in his chair as pale as death when luck had turned so decidedly against him.

Though he was one of the silver kings of the Pacific slope, the loss of a hundred and forty thousand dollars nettled him, and he jumped eagerly at this chance to retrieve the fortunes of the night, particularly as the ex-sheriff hastened to whisper in his ear:

"Take him up! the odds are a million to one that he can't do the trick four times hand-running!"

"By Jove! I'll go you!" the alcalde cried, bringing his clinched fist down with a heavy whack upon the table.

"That's the kind of talk!" exclaimed Bowers, gleefully, evidently eager for a chance to pluck the laurels from the brows of the victors. "Oh, you make me weep for joy! See the tears come out of these hyer aged eyes as big as walnuts!"

"Too much whisky," remarked the Indian, sententiously.

The snicker that arose from the crowd at this shot exasperated the dealer.

"Nary time!" he responded, in lignantly. "Letting on it alone is w'ot is the trouble with me. I'm off my feed, but thar ain't ary man in the crowd w'ot dares for to take compassion on me by filling me plum'-full of fire-water arter this matinee is over."

"No goodee—not 'nough whisky in town," responded Lee Sing, with a wise shake of the head.

Again the bystanders laughed, but before Bowers could retaliate on his antagonists, De Welcher had finished drawing up four checks for forty thousand dollars apiece and tossed them over to the faro-table.

"Now then—there are checks for a hundred and sixty thousand dollars," he said. "But win or lose, it ends the game to-night. If I'm stuck I shall be three hundred thousand out, and that is enough for any man to lose, even on this coast, where we are not supposed to value money any more than so much water."

This was reasonable enough, and Red Richard nodded assent.

"All right, just as you please about that; I never ask any man to keep on playing after he comes to the conclusion that it is time to quit, but as the luck has run dead against you I thought I was only doing the fair thing by giving you an opportunity to get even."

"The money's up—money talks!" cried De Welcher, roughly. "After this deal is made you will not be anxious to go on, for you will not have any money to go on with."

"Oh, if I lose this trifle hyer it will not break me. I'm game to play you all night, win or lose, if you dare to keep on, and I don't brag about being as solid as the Bank of California, either."

"Make your game, gents!" cried Bowers, just

from the force of habit, for he knew very well that with this big contest in progress no one else was likely to chip in.

"All of you got your money up? All right then, here she goes!"

To have one card turn up a winner four times in succession, is something that few players see more than once in a lifetime, but the luck that attended Red Richard was really wonderful, for again the queen won.

The alcalde had bent eagerly forward, for this time he felt sure he would succeed in getting the best of the man whom his instinct told him was a deadly foe and, therefore, when the first winning card that the nimble fingers of Bowers slipped from the box turned out to be a queen De Welcher sunk back in his chair with a bitter curse that was heard all over the room.

"Come! I'll give you another chance, just to show you what a clean white man I am!" Red Richard cried. "We'll leave the whole stake on the table and we'll put it on any card that you choose. I ain't afraid to make the offer for I know luck don't run your way for a cent and I can beat you no matter how you take me!"

The alcalde was deadly pale and his eyes gleamed like a madman's, but with a great effort he restrained his anger and controlled the impulse which prompted him to jump at the throat of his foe, like a tiger upon his prey.

"I said that win or lose the game would come to an end when this affair was decided, and men who know me understand that I always mean exactly what I say," he replied, coldly. "The game is closed, gentlemen. Bowers, have the table covered."

"Well, you see I have never been formally introduced to you, and that accounts for my not knowing you any better," Red Richard remarked; "but I've no doubt we will get acquainted one of these days. We can divide the plunder easily enough now, boys; we want just eighty thousand apiece, which is a very tidy little sum to start on."

The division was made; each of the pards secured his "plunder," followed by the envious looks of the crowd, and then Red Richard made the announcement which they had all been so anxious to hear.

"Now, fellow-citizens, as I reckon that it is my 'say-so,' what will you take?"

"Wine!" howled every mother's son of them, for it is a strange fact that in all such cases as this, although the majority of those interested would most decidedly have preferred whisky or even plebeian beer, yet as it is the general opinion that all such triumphs should be celebrated with the sparkling vintage, champagne, they magnanimously stifled their private likings and voted as one man for the imported cider which masquerades in wine-bottles.

"Set up a dozen baskets, if you've got that many in the house!" Red Richard commanded. "I'm paymaster general to-night, and every man here shall put a bottle or two where it will do the most good, in honor of my breaking, for the second time, the largest bank west of the old Rockies!"

"Hurray for Red Richard!" yelled one of the crowd, and the rest took up the cry.

The wine was produced—a half-dozen baskets only—for that was all there was in the house, and then came a season of wild revelry, under cover of which the alcalde and his friends retired.

Up stairs, in his private apartment, De Welcher hunted up a bottle of brandy and drained a glass of the potent stuff as though it were so much water.

"I am all on fire!" he cried, hoarsely, to Benefast, who had been directed to come with him.

"Did you ever see such cursed luck since you were born?" he continued. "What is this man? A demon, that he seems able to baffle me at every turn?"

"Oh, no; not so bad as that," the chief of police replied. "He's a sure enough man, but there's no denying that he has had a famous run of luck ever since he struck this 'ere town."

"But is it going to last forever? Will I never get a chance to get even with him?"

"Oh, yes; your turn will come; 'tain't possible for ary man to hold a winning hand all the time, no matter how lucky he may be."

"Curse the fellow! he has won a fortune from me since he struck the camp, and if the thing goes on at the rate of three hundred thousand dollars a lick, why even a bonanza king would be apt to weaken at last."

"But it won't go on; I've got a job fixed for him this very night, that I think will be pretty sure to put a stop to his fun."

"That's good! never mind what it costs, go for him!"

"Just you keep on the lookout! I reckon you will be able to see the fun from the windows in this hyer identical room."

The apartment occupied by De Welcher was on the second floor of the hotel and fronted on the street.

"Jest you keep on the watch, while I go and start the thing," Benefast continued, retreating to the door. "It's a dollar to a cent we down him to night!" was his parting remark.

CHAPTER XVI.

A STREET FIGHT.

It took the revelers about half an hour to dispose of the wine, and then, when the last bottle was finished, as it was after midnight, the presiding genius of the saloon suggested that it was about time for the party to adjourn so that he could close up and get to bed.

Out into the street then went the crowd, full of joy and liquor, and a merrier party never capered in the streets of a mining camp.

Red Richard was the hero of the hour, and although he did his best to get rid of his demonstrative friends so that he could go home and retire, a dozen or so insisted upon accompanying him for fear that he might lose his way, as they explained, although how a man could possibly lose his way on a bright moonlight night in traversing the few hundred yards that lay between the Grand Pacific Hotel and O'Glory's Palace was a mystery.

Foremost in this "gang" was the veteran Joe Bowers, now decidedly the worse for liquor, for as he touchingly expressed it:

"I don't bear no malice, not a mite! Though you did clean me out and skin me wuss than I ever was skun afore, I don't hold no grudge 'gin' you, R. Richard, esquire, nary time! You did it well! I will go dollars on that 'ere, as long as a man can shake a stick at them! Never see'd a thing done more scientifically since I was hatched. It 'minds me of the time when I 'jined a leetle poker party down in Frisco, whar there war old Jones of Nevada, Mackey and Flood and Rallston, Vanderbilt, Jay Gould and a lot of the solid men to the front, and I won a pot of two millions of dollars by bluffing the gang with a pair of deuces. I drew nary a keerd—they reckoned I had a 'pot' hand, and when I slapped my check for a million on the table and dared 'em for to see and call me, nary one of them would stand the racket. The Prince of Wales was the first to draw out, and then the King of the Sandwich Islands allowed that he had enough, President Grant sed he had forgot 'bout a Cabinet meeting and dusted, Gould and Vanderbilt remarked that there was a leetle railroad war they had agreed to stop, and the rest all quit too, every durned one of 'em, and I collared the pile, three millions ef it was a cent!"

The crowd gazed at the speaker aghast; it takes a good deal to upset men used to the beautiful climate of California, but Bowers was equal to the task.

The Man-from-Red-Dog was the first to find his tongue.

"Pard, you are the champion liar!" he declared.

"Hey?" exclaimed Bowers, balancing himself on his rather unsteady pins and gazing earnestly at the other; "whar in thunder did you get introduced to me?"

"You lay it on with a whitewash brush, you durned fat old rascal!"

"Hey? Seems to me that you air pretty well acquainted with a chap 'bout my size. But do I heer aright?" cried Bowers, suddenly, and with a dramatic start, so violent that if it had not been for two of his neighbors who caught him, he would have gone over on his back. "Does it dawn upon me disordered vision that you long-legged galoot of a kangaroo dar' to doubt the word of sich a man as Joe Bowers? Don't you b'lieve that I bu'sted the gang for a five-million pot and me with the papers right hyer in my trunk to show for it?"

"Hold on! it was two millions when you started in!" suggested one of the miners, who had taken upon himself the weighty task of keeping the veteran upon his feet.

"W'ot if I did say two million?" Bowers cried, with a glance of withering contempt at his supporter. "I reckon I know what I am 'bout—I reckon I know w'ot I'm saying without having ary Jack for to brag ag'in' me. Whar's the interest? Ain't that got to be counted? Guess if you galoots had run as many savings-banks as I hav' you'd kinder git some idee how interest counts up."

The party laughed at this novel way of getting out of it, and as they had been slowly strolling along while the conversation was progressing, by this time they had arrived at O'Glory's Palace.

"Now, gentlemen, with many thanks for your attention, I will bid you good-night," Red Richard said.

"Shake hands all round, pard, and I'll be the first, jest to show that I don't harbor no grudge if ye did win five hundred thousand ducats at my table!" exclaimed Bowers.

"Say, for goodness' sake, won't somebody choke this fat cuss with a halter?" cried Dandy Jim, bringing his heavy hand down with such energy upon Bowers's back as to bring the tears to his eye.

"A blow—a blow, and the blower lives!" howled Bowers, struggling to get loose from the grip of the two who held them. "Oh, thar's blood on the face of the moon. Say, kangaroo, did you go fur to hit me that time on purpose?"

"You bet I did; w'ot of it?"

"Wa-al, that's all right then. I'm no man to find fault or to kick up a fuss with a man for a

little thing like that, but if you hadn't meant for to do it, though, then, upon my eternal soul, blood, lago, blood!"

"Shet up or you'll get us all in the calaboose!" remonstrated one of the citizens.

"Put me in the calaboose—old Joe Bowers in the calaboose? Not much; not whar they know me! They might do it in some town that I had never been introduced to, but nary time whar I'm known. They tried that on me once in Los Angeles afore they knowed me, and w'ot was the result? They had to board me free gratis for nothing for six months, afore I would consent to forgive the insult and leave town; and they sed that in six months more I would have bred a famine and bankrupted the county."

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed the rest at this ridiculous narration, and then from behind O'Glory's Palace, where they had evidently been ambushed, came the whole police force of the town, twelve burly, well-armed men. The sergeant, Jake Jackson, was in command of the party.

Red Richard's weapons were out in an instant; it was not often that he was taken unawares; and as the moonlight danced upon the nickel-plated revolvers of the sharp, it seemed as though if it had been the idea of the police to effect a surprise, the thing had not been a success.

In the party, besides the Red-Dogite, Mud Turtle and the Chinaman, were five of the townsmen, good, stout fellows every one of them, men over whom no one could walk with impunity.

"Say, what are you making all this noise for?" cried the sergeant, in a very offensive manner, and Red Richard suspected instantly that the man intended to pick a quarrel.

"Go put yer head in soak!" replied Bowers, indignantly, just enough under the influence of liquor to be ugly. "How dar' you talk to gentlemen on the king's highway, you mule-headed Saracen? Marry come up and go to! base caltiff! ignoble slave! slab-sided Digger Injun cuss! Lemme get at him! You don't dar' fur to knock a chip off my shoulder!"

"I reckon I'll have to gather you in!" cried the police leader, grimly. "Pick your men, boys, and out with your weapons!"

"Hold on! hold on!" rung out Red Richard's warning voice, while the rest of the party immediately seized their weapons, Bowers's two supporters dropping him unintentionally, so that he sunk down in a sitting posture, his back supported by the wall of the house.

"These revolvers of mine are self-cockers. I've got the drop on you," he continued, "and I give you fair warning, the first man that attempts to pull a weapon on me I will drill a hole in so quick that he will never know what hurt him. We don't want any trouble with anybody, and we don't intend that any one shall make any trouble with us. Some of my friends may have drank a little more wine than is good for them, but they will not disturb the town, and no one has any right to arrest them."

"We are the police of the camp!" exclaimed Jackson, a little uncertain how to proceed.

He had been offered a reward of a thousand dollars if he could succeed in killing the stranger sharp, and such a sum was not to be picked up every day.

The police had talked the matter over among themselves, and the idea had been to surprise the party, provoke a quarrel, and during the fight to "lay out" Red Richard.

But now that they were face to face with that gentleman the job did not appear to be so easy as they had thought it.

If his statement was true—if his revolvers were self-cockers—the hammers lifting and falling with a single pull—it was certain that he would be able to do considerable damage before the assailants would be able to get their weapons in working order.

And then, too, the rest were showing fight in a manner that they despised.

Even the Indian and the Chinaman had drawn revolvers, and clearly intended to defend themselves.

"See hyer, this hyer ain't the way to talk; we're the police, and you're 'bliged to go along with us!" exclaimed Jackson, thinking by blustering to gain a point.

"Whar's yer warrant?" howled Bowers; "no man has a right to be arrested in the glorious climate of Californy without a warrant! Put that in your pipe and smoke it, you humble-backed sons of sea-cooks!"

"Surrender, or we'll salivate you!" threatened Jackson.

"Don't talk about salivating; saltpeter will not save you after we get through with you, if you don't draw off your men and go about your business. I give you fair warning—I'm a dead-shot, and if you attempt to pull on me I shall fire to kill!" Red Richard continued.

"Go for 'em, boys!" cried the police leader.

CHAPTER XVII. THE DEFEAT.

THE police were all game men, and despite the threatening revolvers of the stranger sharp they pulled out their weapons and the miners

were equally as prompt, but before any of them could raise the hammer of a pistol, the revolvers of Red Richard barked loudly on the still night air.

Four shots, fired so quickly that the later reports seemed but the echoes of the first, and four men were down, disabled from taking any further interest in the affair.

Jackson, the leader, was the first to fall, and the three of his followers the quickest to draw their weapons had reason to repent of their rashness.

By the time that the last of the four had fallen, revolvers were cocked and discharged on both sides.

The miners were enraged at the attack and were quite as ready to show fight as the police.

Six or eight shots were exchanged, Red Richard had the skin of his shoulder broken by a well-aimed ball, The-Man-from-Red-Dog got an ugly scratch on his right cheek from another which caused him to swear in the most awful and blood curdling manner, one of the miners received a ball in his side, and a second unlucky fellow was stretched on his back, mortally wounded.

The police did not escape damage, though, for two of the eight were killed outright and two more tumbled over, badly hurt.

There were now only four out of the twelve left, and they took to their heels, dismayed at the reception which had greeted them.

At first the victors did not attempt to follow up their advantage, but when they discovered that their companion was dying, and he in his agony cried out for vengeance upon his slayers, their blood rose to fever-heat.

The pard of the dying man was the old gray-bearded miner, of whom we have before spoken, Long John Scott.

"Poor Bill is a goner!" he cried, rising to his feet, with the big tears streaming from his eyes. "Poor Bill, the pard that has stuck by me through thick an' thin for nigh onto ten years; as gentle—as good hearted—as squar" a man as ever broke the bread of life! I reckon the boys of the Spread Eagle mine will raise a row when they heern of this hyer bloody deed!"

And then, bursting forth in a sudden fit of passion, he cried:

"I'm for vengeance, I am! The infernal villain that fixed Bill is thar a-running like a scared coyote with a pack of dogs arter him. I see'd him when he pulled the trigger and let Bill have it. He fired two shots, the cowardly skunk! I see'd him give Bill a second shot arter he had tumbled him over with the first one, and that 'ere second ball war w'ot cooked Bill's goose."

"Say, you red-haired cuss!" and he addressed Red Richard, "won't you jine in with me for to help git squar" with the man that laid out my pard—the pard of old Long John Scott?"

"Partner, I'm with you to the death, although, maybe, we'll have to fight the alcalde and the whole town!" Red Richard cried.

"Oh, cuss the alcalde!" cried the old man in a rage. "He's been putting on a heap sight too many airs in this hyer town. I'm a 'forty-niner, I am, and I reckon that no alcalde in Californy is a-going to run over me. Say you'll take the lead, and I'll raise a crowd that will clean out this durned alcalde and his miser'ble police afore you kin say Jack Robinson!"

"I'm your man, partner!" Red Richard exclaimed, secretly glad of a chance to quarrel with the Californian with a part of the town at his back. "We must give chase before these fellows hunt their holes!"

"Raise the war-whoop, and let the camp know we mean business!" Long John yelled.

And then out on the air pealed the loud cries of the avengers, as they ran up the street in pursuit of the police who, after their bloody repulse, had made a bee-line for the Grand Pacific Hotel.

The calaboose, as the rude structure which served as a jail was properly called, was directly in the rear of the hotel, and in it the police force of the town had their quarters.

Benefast, after leaving the Californian, had repaired to his own room, which was a small apartment on the same floor, fronting also on the street, so that both he and De Welcher had a tolerably good view of the street fight.

His idea in parting with the alcalde was to give that gentleman an idea that he intended to take a hand in the fun, but that was not his game at all, for Red Richard had inspired him with such a feeling, that though he would have rejected with scorn the idea that he was afraid of the sharp, yet he was not anxious to encounter him if the meeting could be avoided.

From their posts of observation both of them witnessed the utter rout of the police.

"What good star protects this ruffian?" De Welcher cried in despair, as his police came racing up the street, running for their lives.

"It's a mighty good thing I wasn't there!" the chief of police soliloquized. "Just as like as not I should have been the first man plugged."

The police took refuge in the calaboose, and Benefast hastened to the alcalde's apartment.

"Another little plan gone wrong!" he announced.

"Yes, I saw it all from the window!" the alcalde cried, white with rage. "Why, Benefast, your men ran like sheep!"

"Cuss it, alcalde! you can't expect them to stand their ground and be shot down like a pack of durned dogs!"

"I thought they were fighters! You always said that they could hold their own against five times their number!"

"And so they could, and did, too! War they ever whipped afore? Not much. Jest count over on yer fingers the number of the gangs that they have cleaned out—the gangs that waltzed in to run the town. But this man is a hull durned army. Why, he downed four of our men afore another shot was fired."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the yells of the enraged victors advancing up the street.

"Hallo, hallo! what's that?" De Welcher exclaimed, hastening to the window, followed by the chief of police.

"Pears mighty like a riot," Benefast suggested, as he looked upon the angry men.

By this time about all the men in the camp were awake and on the street attracted by the noise.

Long John was a popular man among the miners, and as his pard was well-known and universally liked, the story of his killing excited a mob spirit immediately.

And then, too, the alcalde and his police had been carrying it with a high hand for the last two or three months and the citizens were just ripe for revolt.

The police had taken refuge in the calaboose, barricaded the doors and windows, and prepared for a desperate resistance when they discovered that their conquerors hungered for more gore.

The shanty in which they had taken refuge was a regular little fortress, and when the avengers came to surround it they speedily came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to dislodge the fugitives without a deal of bloodshed.

By this time there were forty or fifty men on the ground, eighteen or twenty of them anxious for a fight, and the rest more inclined to do the looking-on.

De Welcher determined to take "the bull by the horns," for, as he said to Benefast:

"I think this thing has gone about far enough! If I don't put a stop to it mighty soon it will be a question who is the Alcalde of Shasta Bar, Leonard De Welcher or this infernal Red Richard!"

"That's a fact," replied Benefast, solemnly.

"I fancy the men of the camp will listen to reason when I come to talk to them."

"It won't do a mite of harm to try it on, anyway," but from the way in which Benefast spoke, De Welcher became possessed of the belief that the chief of police had his doubts in regard to the matter, and this annoyed the Californian. He had gone on so long unchecked in his successful career that the idea of an unknown, red-handed ruffian, as he considered the sharp, attempting to dispute his authority in the town which he was satisfied owed everything to him was galling in the extreme.

The ex-sheriff, an older man than the Californian, in the course of his experience had seen more than one popular favorite summarily dethroned by the fickle populace and so, as the tide seemed to be setting so strongly in favor of the stranger, he had serious doubts whether the alcalde would be able to effect anything by appealing directly to the crowd.

Out went the Californian, carrying a stool in his hand, followed by Benefast, and when he came to the open space in front of the calaboose where the crowd was congregated, he put down the stool, stepped up on it, and exclaimed:

"What is the meaning of this? Men of Shasta Bar, what are you about, disturbing the peace and quiet of the town at the dead hour of night?"

The eighteen or twenty men who really meant mischief were all clustered in a group debating "ways and means" whereby the police could be dislodged from their fortress, for although at first the enraged miners had been bent upon making a rush and carrying the place by storm, yet Red Richard had succeeded in talking them out of this idea, for, as he said, there was not one chance out of a hundred for success.

The lookers-on were scattered all around, ready to seek secure posts of observation at the first sign of actual war.

And so interested were they all that the first sign they had of the alcalde's presence was when his voice broke the stillness of the air.

CHAPTER XVIII. BESIEGED.

"HULLO! hyer's the alcalde!" cried Long John. "Come to interfere for his butchers, I s'pose. Will you speechify to him, stranger?"—and he addressed Red Richard—"or shall I argue the p'int?"

"You had better lay down the law to him."

as you are an old citizen of the camp," the other replied.

"I kin do it, pard; alcalde or no alcalde, I kin put it right home to him as straight as a string and don't you forget it."

De Welcher had his eyes on the group of fighting-men when he put the question, so that when the old miner turned around he directly faced the alcalde.

"You want to know what the matter is, hey, alcalde?" Long John exclaimed.

"Yes; and I must confess I am rather astonished to see such a man as you are mixed up in it."

"Such things will happen onc't on a while!"

"You have created a regular riot."

"No, alcalde; not me nor my pard; you are a heap sight out of your reckoning thar', but your bloody police butchers who are a-biding in the calaboose yonder, afeard to come out of their hole lest we riddle 'em with bullets or string 'em up to the nearest tree."

"And what have these men done that you clamor so loudly for their blood?" demanded the Californian, sternly, for he was enraged at the determined language of the miner.

"W'ot hev they done?" fairly yelled the old man. "W'ot have they done? Go down yonder and look at the body of my pard, poor Bill, cut off right into the flower of his youth by your butchers; but they've got to answer for it! I'll have the blood of every man that's in the calaboose yonder; I'll raise a ruction that the camp of Shasta Bar will be apt to remember while grass grows and water runs!"

"Well, I'm sorry to hear of your partner's death, but I don't see how you can justly blame my police for the calamity."

"Not blame 'em!" cried the old man, excitedly; "didn't one of 'em fire the shot that killed him, the cussed scoundrel? and won't I have his heart's blood fur it or lose my own?"

"There isn't any need of all this violence about the matter; the police were only doing their duty, and in part your friend was to blame, for if he had obeyed their injunctions and retired when warned, he would have escaped all danger."

"Oh, he would, eh?" growled the miner.

"Yes, sir, most decidedly he would," replied the alcalde, firmly. "I know exactly what I am talking about, for I saw the whole affair from beginning to end from the window of my apartment in the hotel."

"Wa-al, I reckon I know something 'bout it, too, considerin' I were present."

"You were kicking up a row and disturbing the town—you were told to go home, and this man here," and he pointed directly at Red Richard, "defied the police and brought on the conflict that ensued. If the death of your partner lies at any one's door, he surely is the man."

"Ah, now you are trying the wolf and lamb game," Red Richard remarked, disdainfully. "You may be able to play the wolf well enough, but hang me if I feel inclined to figure as the lamb!"

"Now hol' on, alcalde; stop jist whar you air!" exclaimed Long John, in a dogged way. "You air jist tryin' to crawl out of the hull business, but it can't be did. Yer police was to blame, and you can't argufy 'em out of the matter either."

"You ought to have gone home when they advised you so to do!" exclaimed the alcalde, imperiously.

"The blazes we had!" cried the old miner, contemptuously. "How long since yer police set out to run the hull town? Darn my cats! air we men of Shasta Bar a set of school-boys and know-nothings, that we hev got to be told by yer durned old police when it is time for us to go home? Alcalde, yer'r jist crazy fur to talk in that sort of way! This stranger hyer ain't to blame, onless yer'r going for to set out for to blame a man fur sticking to his pard. He gave yer police far warning. He talked to 'em fair and easy, jist like a Dutch uncle. He told 'em that ef they didn't skoot they would git themselves inter trouble. If you know all 'bout the fuss as you say you do, you know that he jist warned them that if they pulled their weapons on him he would be obligated to go fur 'em. He had the drop on 'em, and if they hadn't been a 'tarnal pack of fools they would hev hauled off instead of pulling their guns on him. But, alcalde, they was like you is now; they was going ahead, right or wrong! And do you s'pose, alcalde, that the men of this hyer camp air a lot of dogs for to run with their tails atween their legs when yer police whistle? No, sir-ee, that ain't the kind of stuff that we air made of, nohow you kin fix it. Yer galoots made all the trouble. They tackled us instead of going along and tending to their own business; they killed my pard, and I'm arter satisfaction, I am!"

The Californian was nettled by the defiant bearing of the miner, nor was he used to such language either. Thanks to the measures that he had taken to surround himself with a strong body-guard, his authority had never been disputed, but now he realized that a crisis had arrived and exactly how to meet it was a puzzle. His carefully-chosen body-guard had been so

roughly handled that out of twelve men only four remained and they were prisoners now in the calaboose with an angry mob besieging them, anxious for their blood.

De Welcher, being naturally headstrong and obstinate, was enraged that his desires were disregarded, for he had an idea that when he came to talk to the angry men they would be pacified, and so he retorted angrily:

"You want to take the law in your own hand—that is what you mean! You and your gang have already laid out eight of my men, and now you want to finish the remainder. You ought to be satisfied with what you have done. Suppose you have lost one of your pards, haven't you disabled eight of my men—isn't that satisfaction enough?"

"No, it ain't!" cried the old miner. "The man w'ot fired that shot is inside of that air calaboose. I see'd him with my own two looking eyes when he plugged poor Bill, and the durned cowardly galoot, he fired at my pard arter he was down, and that's w'ot riles me."

"Look here! there has got to be a stop put to this!" exclaimed the alcalde, decidedly.

"How are you a-going to do it?" responded Long John, defiantly.

"Why, I will call upon the citizens to support me in my efforts to preserve law and order!" cried the alcalde, haughtily.

"I reckon that 'ere is a game that two kin play at! You kin call on yer friends and I will call upon mine, and we'll fight yer tooth and nail for all we're worth while thar's a man able to keep his feet."

The Californian was a little taken aback at this prompt acceptance of his challenge, for he had uttered the words more in a spirit of idle boasting than with any idea of carrying them out.

"Upon the whole though," he remarked, thinking that he saw a way to get out of the difficulty, "I don't know but the wisest thing for me to do would be to let you go ahead in your folly, for the probabilities are that my men yonder will give you a lesson that not one of you brawlers who live to tell of it, will ever be apt to forget. They are in a pretty strong fortress and, as I happen to know, well supplied with weapons and ammunition. There are eight or ten rifles in the house and four or five hundred cartridges, so when you fellows attempt to carry the place by storm, they will be able to pick you off like so many partridges."

Long John and his friends looked grave at this announcement, but Red Richard came instantly to the rescue.

"Oh, alcalde, that isn't the game that we will play; we know a trick worth two of that!" he exclaimed. "We are not fools enough to attack the house directly, and give your fellows a chance to shoot us down, without our being able to get a crack at them. On the contrary, that is exactly the lay-out that we are after. We calculate to persuade your police to get out of that building, and then we will massacre them without mercy. They will run out of that house like rabbits, and we will have the biggest sport in the world. If you would like to take a hand in the fun, alcalde, I'll lend you a shooter."

The Californian frowned at this cold-blooded proposition, and his anger was great, for he understood that the sharp was dilating upon the killing of his besieged men for the express purpose of annoying him.

And so, despite the rage he felt, he kept his temper.

"I've no doubt that you have a very persuasive way with you, but I doubt very much if you will succeed in getting my men out of that house while your gang stands ready to shoot the first man that appears."

"Oh, they will come at my say-so."

"I doubt it."

"I shall make the place too hot to hold them."

"How will you accomplish that?"

"Play the old game, set the house on fire by means of burning arrows. The building is old and dry and will burn like tinder; there's no water there nor any other means of putting out the fire, when it gets fairly started, and with the roof in a blaze over their heads, it is either remain and be roasted to death like trapped vermin, or else come out and fight like men."

Benefact saw a chance to help his men.

"Why don't you give 'em a fair show, man to man?" he cried. "Pick out four of your party and have a good squar' fight."

"It's a go! we'll take that offer!" the sharp replied.

A yell of assent from his companions followed.

CHAPTER XIX.

PREPARING FOR THE CONTEST.

THE proposal jumped exactly with the peculiar notions of the miners, and one and all pronounced it to be the "squarest kind of a deal."

"It were the only thing that could be did," the chief of police remarked, hurriedly, in the alcalde's ear. "Our fellers wouldn't have a ghost of a show if this cuss carried out his idea of setting fire to the house; now they stand some chance for their lives, and mebbe they may be lucky enough to git the best of the fight."

The Californian nodded; he agreed with the speaker. In fact, it was the only possible way, as far as he saw, by which the police could get out of the hobble.

The alcalde's first idea had been that by appealing to the citizens a force might be raised sufficient to quell this revolution against his authority, but, after carefully surveying the ground, he had come to the conclusion that it would not be an easy matter.

It was plainly to be seen that popular indignation had been excited, and his police were in bad odor just then.

"A fair fight, man to man!" Long John exclaimed; "that's squar'—assquar' as squar' kin be! That suits me—suits all on us I reckon, but it's understood that I am to be one of the four, and the man I'm hungry arter is the cowardly coyote w'ot socked it to poor Bill, when he laid a-weltering in his blood, and with no more fight into him than a kitten."

"Decidedly, your claim must be allowed," Red Richard remarked, "and I think it is only fair that I should be counted in also."

"You bet!" cried The-Man-from-Red-Dog, "and I'm a mule-headed son of a big-horned sheep if I ain't counted in! Jest look how the p'isoned skunks sp'iled my good looks for me. Look at my face! Wouldn't any gent say that I had been clawed by a catamount? In course! And ain't I going to be allowed a chance to get squar'? W'ot'll my gal say when she lets her own two good-looking eyes rest on this hyer woeful countenance? Why, I wouldn't have had this hyer elegant face of mine sp'iled for my weight in gold-dust!"

"Mud Turtle fight mean white man!" declared the Indian. "See, make big holes in blanket," and the red-skin held up his tattered blanket exhibiting two bullet-holes in it. "New blanket—only ten years old," and the savage shook his head gravely, while the rest smiled at the idea of the wretched article being injured by anything short of total destruction.

"Well, that makes the four," Red Richard observed.

Then there was an immediate protest on the part of those who were "left out in the cold," as they expressed it, by this arrangement, but Long John settled the matter by saying:

"We four hev all put in a putty good claim for to be counted in; me, 'cos my pard was killed, Red Richard hyer, 'cos he has kinder taken the lead in this hyer hull business, this big cuss," and he pointed to Dandy Jim, "'cos they hev tuck the bark off his figure-head, and the Injun has got a good claim for damages. If ary one of ye kin make a better showing let him pile in!"

This stumped the rest, and so it was agreed that the four should be the ones to give battle.

It was rather a novel thing this duel of eight, and although Shasta Bar had witnessed quite a number of "affairs of honor" since its settlement, this went ahead of anything that the camp had ever seen.

"When will this thing take place?" the alcalde asked.

"Right away, I should suggest," the sharp replied. "There's no time like the present. The moon affords ample light, and I reckon all of us are pretty well warmed up so we will be able to make a good showing."

The Californian consulted the chief of police.

"Might as well have the matter settled now as any other time," he advised. "When our boys find out how things are, I reckon they will make a good fight. It will be like men fighting with halters around their necks, you know."

"They are four of our best men, ain't they?"

"Yes; and they wouldn't have run neither if the odds hadn't been against them. They are no fools, you know; they know enough to give leg-bail when they find they are in a tight place, but this time, when they find that it is a good, squar' show for 'em—that it is only man to man, you can bet all your pile that they will give a good account of themselves."

"Give them instructions to kill this Red Richard at the very first of it," the alcalde whispered. "He is the dangerous one—more dangerous, to my thinking, than all the rest put together."

"That's so, every time!"

"I'll give a thousand dollars to the man that finishes him!"

"The boys will do their level best, you kin depend upon that."

"What are the terms of the fight?" and the alcalde turned to Red Richard.

"Oh, it is immaterial to us, I guess, eh, boys?" replied the sharp, turning to his companions.

"I don't keer a durn fur the terms of the fight so long as we have a fair show for our money," Long John declared.

"And that's the kind of antelope I am too; a fair show, and may the best man win!" Dandy Jim exclaimed.

"Me 'nother antelope too, you bet!" the Indian remarked.

"What weapons will you use?" the alcalde asked.

"Oh, we'll be generous and give your party the choice of weapons. We don't care a continental," Red Richard replied. "We're ready to

fight with anything from ten-pounders down to popguns."

"Suppose we say a pair of revolvers and a knife to each man?" suggested the chief of police.

"That is satisfactory," replied the sharp, and the rest nodded.

"But your revolvers are self-cockers, and that gives you an advantage," the alcalde remarked, quick to take advantage of every point.

"I've got another pair here that are not," and Red Richard, pushing aside the skirt of his buckskin coat, revealed the fact that he had two pairs of revolvers belted to his waist.

"Durn me if you ain't a regular walking arsenal!" Benefast growled.

"I'm well-heeled, you can bet all your dust on that, and the man that picks me up for a tenderfoot will get badly sold."

"Well, it is understood then," said the Californian. "Two revolvers and a knife apiece. The distance—"

"A hundred feet, say," observed the chief of police, "and each man to stand ten feet from his neighbor, and directly opposite his antagonist. The signal for the fight to be a pistol-shot, and after the shot is fired, each man to be at liberty to go ahead exactly as he thinks best."

"And two or three men have the privilege of attacking one, if it so pleases them," put in the alcalde.

"Wa-al, I dunno 'bout that," objected Long John. "Is that the squar' thing?"

"Why not?" asked the sharp. "That is a knife that cuts both ways. It is just as fair for one as it is for the other."

"That's so," said the miner.

"Cert! you kin bet yer rocks on that!" The Man-from-Red-Dog declared. "I don't mind it. I reckon from the way the galoots dusted into this hyer shanty that I wouldn't have much trouble in busting the hull crowd, single-handed."

"The thing is to be fought out to the bitter end, as I understand it," remarked Red Richard. "The fight to go on until one side is cleaned out or gives up whipped."

"That is the programme!" exclaimed the alcalde.

"And no malice to be borne, no matter which side wins the fight?"

"Malice on account of a good, squar' fight!" howled Dandy Jim. "Why, who on earth ever heered tell on sich a thing in a Christian country?"

"That is understood, of course," replied the alcalde, "and now where shall be the battleground?"

"The flat right above the camp by the river would be a good place," suggested the chief of police.

"That suits us; get your men out and put them in position; we don't want to be all night over this picnic," quoth the sharp.

"Warn them to use their utmost endeavors to kill this ruffian at the first fire," the alcalde whispered in the ear of the official as he departed.

Benefast replied by a knowing nod, and then proceeded to the calaboose to make known to his men the trial that awaited them.

Red Richard and his fellow-champions made ready for the contest.

The intelligence of this unusual duel had spread rapidly through the town, and when the contending parties arrived upon the ground which had been selected for the fight, they found that about all the inhabitants of the Bar had collected there to witness the encounter.

As it happened, the four policemen who had been thus strangely forced into this duel, were considered by Benefast to be the best four men of the twelve.

True they had retreated in hot haste from the scene of the former fight, but that was owing to a sudden panic liable to be experienced by the best of men, and now they were eager to wipe out the disgrace, and were fully as anxious for the encounter as their antagonists.

"Give a good account of yourselves, boys," was the parting injunction of the ex-sheriff, after he had placed them in position. "Remember, you're in a tight box hyer. This is a fight to the death. Either die or crawl, you know, and the man that shows the white feather will have to dust out of this region pretty lively, now, I tell yer, for this valley won't be big enough to hold him."

Grimly each man protested that he would rather die than give in.

Then they took their places, revolvers in hand.

CHAPTER XX. THE DUEL.

THE duelists were arranged in two parallel lines, running from the river, on the open plain just above the camp.

At a safe distance from the scene of action, but in a direct line with the center of the space that separated the contending parties, stood the alcalde, who had been selected to give the signal for the duel to commence, and behind him were grouped the citizens.

And while the duelists were taking their

places there was some little chaffing indulged in by these grave, rough-looking, bearded men.

A most decided sentiment prevailed in favor of Red Richard's party, and the Californian was considerably nettled by the unguarded expressions that the citizens indulged in regarding his police.

"I pity the poor shoats," said one; "w'ot show do they stand in this hyer ruction?"

"A show to be chewed up," suggested another.

"That red-ha'ed cuss could clean out the hull b'ilin' himself, I reckon, if he got a good ready onto him," remarked another.

"Oh, it's ten dollars to one that the alcalde's galoots will be cleaned out!" exclaimed a rough fellow, apparently indifferent whether the Californian overheard him or not.

"Do you hear the infernal bounds?" muttered the alcalde to the chief of police, who stood by his side. "Do you hear them, and after all I have done for the camp too? I have spent my money like water, and this is the way I am repaid. I don't believe that there is hardly a man in the crowd who wouldn't be glad to see my men killed by these ruffians."

"I am afraid, alcalde, that is about the size of it. Thar's no denying this red-ha'ed cuss has captured the town. But I'll jest put a stop to that feller that wants to bet ten to one, 'cos I reckon our boys stand a better show than that. Red Richard is a tearer, I'll allow, but I don't take much stock in his pards; and counting him out, I know our gang could fix 'em. That Long John is no good in a fuss, the big feller is a wind-bag, and whoever heered of a red-skin that war wuth his salt in sich a fight as this hyer! If they kin only down the sharp, and they are all going for him at the first pop, I reckon they'll have an easy job to git away with the rest."

"No doubt about that; if they plug him the battle will be won."

"Yes, sir-ee!" cried another man in the crowd at this point, "it's twenty to one ag'in' the alcalde's gang! That Red Richard is jest lightning, and them four don't stand any more chance to get away with him than they do to make the water in that 'ere river run up-hill."

This was more than the chief of police could bear.

"See hyer, I reckon you're shooting yer mouth off pretty lively, ain't you?" he exclaimed. "Now if you are talking for business and not for fun, if you are willing to come right down to the bed-rock, I'm the man for your money! My men out thar are as good men as ever struck this camp, bar none! I'll go you one ag'in' twenty that they won't be skinned! I'll take that up, jest fer greens. This Red Richard is a good man and all that, but he ain't the earth, and he don't own it. Come, now, how big a pile will you go? I'll risk fifty to a hundred on it. Back your words up now with your dust!"

But this was exactly what the loud-talking individual could not do. His wealth was limited, although his ideas were great and he was obliged to admit that he was not well-heeled for betting just then.

So it was an easy matter for Benefast to turn the laugh upon him.

"I reckoned you wouldn't come to the scratch when time was called," he remarked, contemptuously. "Men who talk so big generally go broke when the time comes for them to put up their dust, but when I blow my horn, there's something back of it, you can bet your life! I am jest anxious to lose a leetle money on this picnic, for I've got a heap sight more than I know what to do with. I'll bet any man within the sound of my voice one against ten—one against five—even—on my crowd!"

At this point Joe Bowers pushed his way through the crowd, his fist full of bank bills.

The veteran, after being abandoned by his supporters in consequence of the attack of the police, not being in a condition to keep upon his legs he had sunk down against the side of the house, and being a man that could make himself comfortable anywhere, dropped quietly to sleep, despite the noise of battle.

Some one had taken the trouble to awaken him on the eve of the fight, thinking it a pity that he should miss such a glorious spectacle as this duel promised to be, and therefore Bowers had arrived on the scene of action just in time to hear the chief of police banter the crowd.

"I'm yer man, Timotheus!" he howled. Bowers had been sobered in a measure by his nap, although he was still a little unsteady on his feet.

"I'm yer man," he repeated. "You are off your base, me noble dook, fur to want to bet even, when it ought to be big odds. You are a friend of mine and I hate to scoop you, but biz is biz, you know. This red-hair cuss is a terror! I'm a heap on the fight, myself, but I wouldn't want to stand up ag'in' him, 'less I had an army at my back."

The alcalde was nettled at the idea of one of his own men, as he considered Bowers, daring to lift his voice in behalf of the stranger.

"See here, Bowers, you talk too much!" he exclaimed, "and you are not in a fit condition now to make any bets. You better go home, go

to bed and sleep off the effects of the liquor you have drank!"

"Why, alcalde, I hain't been h'isting enough fur to hurt a sick cat!" Bowers exclaimed, reproachfully. "Don't go fur to think that I'm full of fire-water 'cos I ain't; I'm a leetle excited 'bout this hyer thing, that's all."

"They're waiting on you, alcalde!" cried one of the citizens, anxious for the "fun" to commence.

Sure enough the duelists were in position, ready for the signal.

"Are you all ready, gentlemen?" the Californian cried.

"Ready!" replied all the antagonists in a breath.

Up went the alcalde's arm, and "crack" rung out the pistol-shot, and the march of the antagonists toward each other began immediately.

When ten or fifteen steps had been taken, at a word from Red Richard his line halted, brought up their left arms as supports and took deliberate aim resting their pistols upon them.

The police, not up to this mountain dodge, were taken by surprise, and fearing the consequences of the deliberate aim that their antagonists were taking, at once poured in a volley upon them; eight shots they fired, and the result astonished the lookers-on. Every shot seemed to have told.

Red Richard and his companions staggered back, went down upon their knees and then rolled over, apparently badly hit.

Cries of astonishment arose from the crowd of citizens.

"Durned if they ain't wiped out t'other gang at the first lick!" the chief of police cried.

"At last!" the alcalde exclaimed, in a tone of savage delight, and yet he could hardly believe it possible that he had compassed the death of his foe so easily.

"They're done for, as sure as you're born!" howled an excited citizen.

"Nary time!" yelled Bowers, equally as loud. "Stranger! I tell ye thar's a heap o' fun in those galoots yet!"

And the police themselves were so much amazed at the complete success of their fire, that they halted irresolutely for a moment, and then one of them, more bloodthirsty than his fellows, cried out:

"This fight is to the death, boys! let's sail in and put an end to 'em—put 'em out of their misery, you know!"

This horrible proposition was received with savage joys by the comrades of the speaker, hot with the rage of battle; with brandished weapons they rushed upon their prostrate foes, but when they had got within fifty feet of the spot where they had gone down, up on their knees rose all of the four, moving as if by clock-work, and before the astonished assailants could comprehend what it meant the sharp cracks of four revolver-shots rung on the air.

Each marksman had picked his man, and each bullet reached its billet.

Red Richard dropped his foeman with a bullet in the temple, Long John had aimed for the heart of his antagonist, but the ball had gone an inch or so wrong and tore through the lungs.

The Indian, a dead-shot with any and every weapon, had sent his bullet crashing through the brain of his opponent.

The Man-from-Red-Dog, the poorest marksman of the three pards, had aimed for the chest, and succeeded in lodging a ball in the man's shoulder.

Never was there a victory more complete or more unexpected.

It all took place in a second, as it were; in one breath, yells of triumph, as the policemen rushed in to dispatch their foes, and in the next, the notes of victory changed into hollow groans, as the assailants went down before the deadly fire of their antagonists.

The trick had succeeded to perfection; three of the policemen lay dead upon the field, while the fourth was so badly wounded that whether he would live or die was a question time alone could decide.

For a moment the alcalde glared upon the scene, and then, sick with rage, turned away.

"This man is a devil," he said, hoarsely, in Benefast's ear, "and I begin to believe that it is either his life or mine!" and then he strode from the scene.

"The alcalde will have to get a new police force," one of the citizens remarked.

CHAPTER XXI. A SURPRISE.

THE stirring events of the night did not efface from Red Richard's memory the mysterious message which he had received, and he was prompt in keeping the appointment, on the next morning, although there was a doubt in his mind when he set out in regard to what was before him.

That the alcalde was determined to have his life or drive him from the town he knew full well, but so far he had most decidedly the best of the fight, and he felt about as well as he ever did in his life as he went along enjoying the balmy morning breeze, laden with the balsamic odor of the pines that clothed the neighboring foot-hills.

The sharp had overheard the remark uttered by the old miner in regard to the alcalde being obliged to get a new set of policemen, and it amused him.

"Truth, every word of it, too," he soliloquized, as he walked toward the meeting-place. "The police force is cleaned out—most effectually cleaned out—and after what has happened, I fancy the alcalde will have considerable difficulty in raising another, for by all accounts these fellows were the greatest bullies in the town, and if that gang of tough citizens couldn't hold their own what earthly show is there for a new set? I must be on my guard more than ever from this time out, for now that open force has failed my man will be apt to try if there is any virtue in secret measures.

"This may be a trap that I am going into now, but I'll risk it, for I don't think it is likely. The best card he had in his hand he played last night, and from the way the game was laid out, I reckon he thought it would finish me beyond a doubt.

"Twelve against one was pretty big odds, and I should, undoubtedly, have had a hard time of it if it hadn't been for my pards and the miners taking a hand in the affair, and that is where the schemer didn't get his work in fine; if he had been smart he would have tried to get at me alone. He couldn't have succeeded in that little game, though, for my boys are always within call; still, as it was impossible for him to know that fact, it shows that his head-piece is not as good as it is cracked up to be, or else he would have worked the game so as to catch me alone."

As he finished the sentence he passed around a bend in the trail and came upon The-Man-from-Red-Dog, who was seated upon a boulder by the road-side, pulling away at a pipe of gigantic dimensions, and as neither Red Richard nor Dandy Jim manifested any surprise at what appeared to be an unexpected meeting, it was plain that the two were acting in concert.

"Well, seen anything?" queried the sharp.

"Nothing bigger'n a jack rabbit."

"I'm a little ahead of time, but I came early on purpose to see the lay of the ground."

"It's all right, pard; thar's nobody in ahead of ye yet."

"Seen Mud Turtle?"

"Nary time, but he'll be on deck, you bet!"

"Our heathen friend up to the mark?"

"I reckon he is, but I ain't seen him. He allowed last night though that he'd be on time; and I tell you you kin put yer money with perfect safety on that almond-eyed son of sin; he's little but he's tough! I onc't used for to think that thar warn't no fight inter a John, but that 'ere leetle yaller cuss kin r'ar up onto his hind legs and kick like a mule when he's drawn inter it."

"Keep yer eyes open!"

"You bet!"

And then Red Richard sauntered away, leaving the giant to enjoy his pipe.

A hundred yards further on, the trail bent from the river and ran over a little grassy plateau, with a few small clumps of bushes scattered here and there.

"This would be a fine spot for a sharp to corral a fellow that he didn't like," Red Richard remarked as he hesitated for a moment and glanced around with the distrust that becomes like a second nature to a man used for years to the wild life of the frontier.

Out from one of the clumps of shrubbery peered the grinning face of Lee Sing.

"Allee light—no sawey 'Melican man top side hillee."

"Nobody around, eh? I guess everything is all right then."

"Allee light, you bet!" and down sunk the Chinaman in his ambush again.

On went the sharp; a few rods more and the trail sought the river's bank; he was at the place designated for the meeting.

Not a living thing was in sight.

It was a little grassy plain, cut in twain by Shasta's swift-flowing waters, and from the banks of the river the ground rose gradually until it met the foot-hills a mile or so distant, and then the rocky mountain-sides hemmed in the valley.

Great boulders cropped out here and there, and about fifty feet from where the sharp halted there was a little cluster of rocks, and something peculiar about this cluster attracted Red Richard's quick eyes.

He laid his hand upon one of the revolvers in his belt, and as he did so a marvelous thing took place.

One of the rocks—an irregular, jagged stone—suddenly became instinct with life.

It moved—it transformed itself into the figure of a man—it was the Indian, Mud Turtle, who had been squatting down amid the boulders, with his discolored blanket wrapped around him, and so artistically had he arranged the blanket and chosen his position that, at a distance, only the practiced eyes of an experienced scout, like Red Richard, would have been able to detect the cheat.

"By Jove! chief, that was about as clever a thing as I ever saw!" the sharp exclaimed. "If I hadn't been on the lookout for mischief, I

should never have detected there was anything wrong, and I reckon I'm no child in prairie matters."

A pleased expression appeared on the face of the red-skin; there was no one else in the world whose praise would have had any effect upon him, but a single word from the red-haired sport was more to him than the applause of a multitude.

"Mud Turtle no fool," the savage replied, "although it is many moons since he dug up the war hatchet, sharpened the scalping-knife, and followed the trail of an enemy."

"You haven't forgot your ancient cunning, that's apparent. Any signs?"

The Indian shook his head.

"Then it's to be a square deal, after all, although I must say I had serious doubts about it. I reckoned it might be another wise little device that the alcalde was working up for my particular benefit. His bullies have failed so badly at a square deal, that I thought he might try to ring in a 'cold deck' upon me."

The Indian shook his head again.

"Nobody been along the trail since the moon went down."

As the reader will perceive from the interviews that Red Richard had held with his pards he had taken every possible precaution against being caught in a trap.

If the design of the sender of the message had been to lure him into an ambush, his companions would speedily have discovered anything like an ambuscade, and by the time the sharp arrived upon the field they would have been prepared to turn the tables upon their opponents and administer to them a most terrible thrashing.

The Indian held up his hand suddenly, then sprung to his feet and stood in a listening attitude.

Red Richard understood that some distant sound had fallen upon Mud Turtle's ears, which his own, though remarkably acute, failed to catch.

"Horse!" ejaculated the Indian.

"Probably my man."

"Galloping."

"Yes, he is behind time."

And now the sharp could distinguish the sound of a horse's hoofs in the distance, coming from the west instead of the east as the sport had expected.

"That's the wrong direction, chief," Red Richard remarked. "My party ought to come from Shasta Bar instead of Cinnabar City; although, really, that is only an idea of mine, for as I haven't the slightest suspicion in regard to who it was that sent the communication, the sender is just as likely to come from one place as the other. There seems to be only a single horse."

"One, no more."

"Get to cover and take position to the west. Red-Dog is guarding the east, and the heathen commands the foot-hills. Nary a surprise party can be worked nohow they can fix it."

The Indian grunted, and then retreating to the rocky ledge, where he had been squatting, disappeared behind the boulders.

Red Richard made a rapid examination of his revolvers, so as to be sure they were in working order, for he felt satisfied that the newcomer was far more apt to prove a foe than a friend.

Then, seating himself on a projecting rock, he calmly awaited for the approach of the rider.

The sound of the horse's hoofs grew more and more distinct, and soon around the bend in the trail came Carlotta, the daughter of old Colonel Perkins, mounted on a handsome brown horse whose slender legs and fine proportions plainly betrayed that it was a thoroughbred.

A slight expression of amazement passed rapidly over the face of the sharp as he beheld this unexpected sight.

Straight toward Red Richard she rode and did not draw rein until she came up to him.

There was an earnest, wishful look upon her face as she halted by his side, the sharp rising at her approach.

For a moment she surveyed him in silence, and then a puzzled expression crept over her features.

"I am the person that sent you the message, sir," she said. "I thought I knew you, and yet, now that we are face to face, I begin to doubt the correctness of my judgment, but I have something important to say to you, nevertheless."

"Would it not be better then to retire to a spot less public, for here on the trail we are liable to be interrupted?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OATH OF VENGEANCE.

THERE was truth in the remark, as the lady immediately perceived. As the morning wore along it was more than probable that travelers would pass up and down on the trail, and naturally the sight of the two in conversation would be sure to attract attention and excite remark.

"By getting to the southward of that little rocky range there, we will still be near the trail, yet screened from observation," and Red Rich-

ard indicated the ledge behind which the Indian had disappeared.

"Very well; let us go thither then at once, for what I have to say is of the highest importance to you, whether you are the person I take you to be or an utter stranger," she said.

"I am entirely at your service, miss," he replied.

And then the twain proceeded in company, passed the rocky ledge—the ground descended a little behind the boulders, so that both horse and rider were hidden from the view of any one passing along the trail.

The two halted and the lady gazed intently upon the face of the sport.

"You are Dick Talbot!" she exclaimed.

"Red Richard is the handle that I answer to up in this region," he replied.

"You are trifling with me! What have I ever done to deserve this treatment?" she cried, in a burst of feeling.

"Nothing—nothing I am sure; I know I can answer for that, although to Red Richard you are a stranger," he answered, his face calm but a trifle pale.

"And why should I be a stranger?"

"I have heard a little of the story of this man, Talbot, that you speak of, yet perhaps you can tell me some things that I do not know. You, if I mistake not, are the daughter of Colonel Perkins."

"Yes, Carlotta; once you knew my name well enough," and the reproachful tones went straight to the heart of the man.

"If I am Dick Talbot, that is doubtless true enough, but do not let us assume that. Let us rather suppose that I am exactly what I represent myself to be, Red Richard, a stranger to Shasta Bar and its people—a sharp whose wandering steps have led him into this valley, merely because the camp is a prosperous one, and the chance for business is good. But to return to the story of Dick Talbot. It is about a year since he dwelt in this camp?"

"Yes, a year since he suffered at the hands of his foes and was compelled to fly like a wild beast when chased by the hunters."

"And do you think that Talbot was the kind of man to submit to such treatment without endeavoring to be revenged?"

"Indeed I do not, and in proof of that a communication which I received from him a short time after the tragic events occurred which caused him to fly from the town, told me that I must not expect to look upon his face again until he had full measure of revenge."

"And what Talbot wrote no doubt Talbot meant. He had been publicly disgraced in this camp before the eyes of all, branded as a felon, and then if he had not been rescued from his persecutors by his devoted friends would have been whipped like a dog. Do you think after such a humiliation a man like Talbot could bear to have the gaze of the world fixed upon him until he had made his enemies shed bloody tears of penitence for the crime?"

"No, I begin to understand now."

"Talbot is dead to the world, and will be dead until every man that had a hand in the infamous work has been made to pay dearly for the part he played in the proceedings."

"And, mark ye, Carlotta, it is no light task that Talbot has taken upon himself. Consider the position and power of the man who secured Talbot's downfall!"

"This fellow, De Welcher, now alcalde of the town, is a man reputed to be exceedingly large-headed, utterly unscrupulous, and backed by a colossal fortune, no mean adversary for the best-heeled man west of the Rockies. And to overcome, pull down from his high estate and force to drink the bitter cup of degradation to the very dregs such a man as this alcalde, is a task so difficult that even the best of men might shrink from undertaking it."

"But Dick Talbot will not be afraid to dare the venture!" she exclaimed, with flashing eyes.

"You are right, he will not, for life is worthless to him until he has wiped out the disgrace this scheming villain heaped upon his head."

"De Welcher worked in the dark; he schemed for weeks and months and waited until the time arrived when he could catch the man he hated unprepared and defenseless, and when that moment came he advanced with the force of the avalanche. Talbot was overpowered, disgraced and driven from the town."

"The mills of the gods grind slow, but they grind exceeding fine." It is an old adage and a true one, as this unscrupulous speculator will find to his cost. Talbot will have the most complete and satisfactory vengeance, but until it is accomplished he will be dead to all. And the work of vengeance will be carried on in exact imitation of the mode of attack adopted by De Welcher. He will never know the blow is coming until he feels the weight of it.

"He worked in the dark; the agent of vengeance will work in the dark also, and yet all the time this wretch of an alcalde will be brought to feel the torments of doubt and dread."

"A just punishment!" the girl exclaimed.

"Already he suspects that Talbot is living—

he thinks that, despite his power, the man whom he wronged is on his trail, determined to do him a mischief. The moment he saw my face he turned pale and trembled, for all the iron nerve of which he boasts. He saw in my features a resemblance to the man he had so fearfully wronged, and who, more than all others in this world, he had good reason to dread."

"And yet the brand of the crimson cross, with which by his orders Talbot's face was disfigured, is not visible upon yours."

"Yes, and that fact is a puzzle to him, for such a scar is seldom effaced."

"But you have succeeded in removing it."

"If I am Talbot, I most certainly have," he rejoined, smiling.

"Oh, I know the truth; you cannot deceive me!" she exclaimed, clasping the hand of Red Richard between her own soft palms and pressing it warmly. "And although I did not happen to meet you when you first arrived, yet when I heard the story of your exploits in the camp I was sure that it was my own true love, masquerading under another name. I do not live in the camp now, but a mile down the valley in a ranch that De Welcher built this spring for the express accommodation of my father and myself. My father is now so feeble that he seldom goes abroad; his once strong constitution is broken down and I fear that he is not long for this world."

"And does he still have implicit faith in De Welcher?"

"Oh, yes; but you must remember that my father is now like a child, no will of his own, no mind, and I have not the least doubt that the influence the alcalde has obtained over him will cease only with death."

"And you are all alone in this villain's power?"

"Do not fear for me, I can protect myself. I am always armed," and she drew from her bosom a tiny, self-cocking six-shooter, a toy, and yet the ball from it, if rightly planted, would soon sap a human life. "And, what is better still, I know how to handle the weapon, and at a short distance am a most expert shot. No one knows that I possess the revolver, for I have been careful to keep the fact a secret from all."

"You have acted wisely, and the knowledge that you are thus protected will take a weight from my mind."

"And now I have some information that may be of value to you," she said, returning the pistol again to its hiding-place. "And this is the reason why I sought an interview with you. Of course I was not sure of your identity, although I had a strong suspicion in regard to it, but even if you turned out to be a stranger, I felt it was my duty to warn you. Two of the alcalde's police were down to the ranch yesterday, and I overheard a conversation between them. They were right under my window, and spoke quite loudly enough for me to overhear what they said, and it was all in reference to you."

"Oh, I can guess the purport of the conversation; the alcalde intended to set the police on to attack me."

"Yes."

"The picnic took place last night, and the alcalde no longer has a police force. I have a body-guard at my back as well as De Welcher, and in the fight we won a most complete victory."

The girl's eyes dilated as she listened to the story of the triumph.

"That is a terrible blow to him?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, and one from which he will not easily recover. You see he depended upon his police to carry out his measures as completely as any robber knight in the olden time relied upon the desperate souls who, by the promise of unlimited plunder, had been induced to enlist under his banner. The lesson was a terrible one, but that is the programme; blow after blow is to be dealt him, and every man that took part in the outrage upon Dick Talbot will live to repent the day when first he beheld the crimson brand."

"The coil of fate will close around him as the anaconda tightens its folds to crush its victim, and when the end comes Dick Talbot will face the world again under his own name."

"It is a terrible thing, but you are not to blame," she said, with a half-shudder. "But now I must say good-by, for I must return ere my absence is discovered. I will contrive to see you again, and until then, farewell."

A warm clasp of hands, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ALCALDE'S SUSPICIONS.

The alcalde and the chief of police sat in council.

It was night; they were in the private apartment of the Californian over the saloon, seated by the window and gazing forth into the street.

Three days had elapsed since the one on the night of which the remarkable duel had occurred; nothing particular had happened during this time, except that Red Richard had made his appearance punctually each evening in the gaming saloon about nine o'clock, attended by The Man-from-Red-Dog and the Indian; the

three had taken seats at the faro-table, and by the time the clock marked the hour of twelve the bank had been forced to suspend, "busted."

It was the talk of the town; even miners from the outlying camps, twenty miles away, came into the Bar after the day's toil was done for the express purpose of getting a look at the man who had been lucky enough to beard the tiger in his native jungle, pull his teeth, and pare his claws.

Five separate times now had the stranger sharp "got away" with King Faro, and such a remarkable run of luck was a wonder even to the oldest gamester in the region.

The subject was debated whenever two men came together, and it was the universal opinion that no such thing had ever happened before since the world began.

And there were plenty of men to wisely predict that such a wonderful run of luck could not continue.

"You jest hold yer hosses and wait," these prophets exclaimed. "No sich thing was ever heered on afore, and it can't last; any man wot bucks the 'tiger' long enuff will be sure for to go broke at last."

But in spite of these wise sayings, the popular belief in Red Richard's luck was so great that when he backed a card to either win or lose no one dared to bet to the contrary.

On the third night of this extraordinary run of luck the excitement had been intense, for during the play the uncertain goddess who presides over these games of chance had acted in the most unstable and fickle manner.

At first the sharp, who never ventured less than five thousand "ducats," as Bowers expressed it, upon a card, had lost constantly, and the alcalde, who from his post of observation was watching the progress of the game as closely as a cat watches a mouse, began to indulge in the hope fortune had changed and that the sharp, before the night was over, would be obliged to retire from the saloon a broken man; therefore as the midnight hour drew near and Red Richard manifested a desire to increase his bets to figures which seemed fabulous to the rest, the alcalde nodded to Bowers to accommodate him, and so it came about that luck veering around at the last moment enabled the sharp, by means of a couple of heavy bets, to wreck the bank.

Red Richard had put in play the ancient idea, borrowed from the gamblers of the Old World, of doubling his stakes at every bet, whether he won or lost and by this system it was, when luck turned, that the bank was broken.

It was early in the night, just after supper-time, and the miners had not yet begun to flock into the camp, and the alcalde and his confidant were speculating in regard to the prospects for the night's business.

"If this infernal run of luck continues," the alcalde declared, "I shall not be able to stand it much longer. Have you any idea what I've lost since this cursed Red Richard struck the town?"

"No, I ain't, but I reckon from wot I've seen that you have been let in pretty heavy."

"Heavy—well, I should smile!" responded the Californian, with a grimace. "I was just figuring it up in my mind, and I find that I am out over three hundred thousand dollars!"

The chief of police indulged in a prolonged whistle, by means of which he wanted to express vast astonishment.

"Yes, sir," the other continued, "a good round sum over three hundred thousand, enough to set a man up in business; in fact, what ninety-nine fellows out of a hundred would consider a fortune."

"Wa-al, thar's no denying that the cuss has had the awfulest run of luck that ever was heerd on."

"And is it honest?" cried De Welcher, abruptly.

"Honest how?"

"Is it luck or treachery?"

"Blamed if I get onto wot you mean!"

"Is the game a square one?"

"That's the way the thing allers has been. A man caught playing a skin game up in this region would git strung up to a tree so quick that he would never know wot hurt him until arter he landed in the other world, and the fellers wot keeps the gate explained matters to him."

"I understand all about that. Bowers had orders to deal a square game; in fact, he said he didn't know how to come the 'brace' if it was wanted. He told me that when he was first engaged. He said that he had learned the business in houses where nothing but a square game was played and so never had any occasion to try his hand at anything else, but at the same time there's no telling whether there's any truth in the story or not; it may be a lie from beginning to end."

"Yes, but I don't really see wot object the galoot could have in giving you the 'brace' at the time he was arter the job." Benefast observed, thoughtfully. "I should think that he would have been a deuced sight more likely to swar that he could do anything with cards than a man could do, if he was an old operator

and up to the trick of a skin game, 'c'es he was mighty anxious to get the job, if you remember."

"Yes, I remember the fact well enough, and he has proved to be a good man, too, although it has been a hard job for him to keep sober, but, if you have noticed, he never drinks anything after supper, and then, no matter how much he may be under the influence of liquor in the afternoon, he always manages to sober up in time for work at night."

"The fat galoot holds as much as a barrel, too."

"The run of luck which has attended this sharp's playing is remarkable. All the old heads of the town agree that nothing like it was ever seen before, and, in fact, not a man in the camp ever even heard of such an extraordinary thing as for a man to break a bank five times in succession, and that is what causes me to suspect that Bowers is not acting squarely."

"You think he is 'bracing' the bank to lose?"

"Yes, that is it, exactly. It seems impossible that it can be sheer, pure luck."

"But there must be some reason for the thing. Bowers is nobody's fool. Good many of these fat galoots are chuckle-headed cusses w'ot don't know enuff fur to go in when it rains, but old Joe Bowers is nary a pilgrim of that sort. He's the kind o' man w'ot knows on which side his bread is buttered, and I reckon he wouldn't play the double on you unless he was mighty well paid for it."

"Well, hasn't this sharp won enough to be able to pay him?" the alcalde demanded.

"Why, if Red Richard was only to give him one-tenth part of his winnings for a single night, wouldn't the sum be more than he would get out of me in a year?"

"That's so; you hit it plum-center that time."

"My suspicions were excited the other night when Bowers, at the time of the fight, offered to bet you that this infernal scoundrel and his companions would come out victors in the fight."

"Yes, I remember that he backed me down, and, in fact, my talk was all wind, for I wouldn't have been willing to bet a cent on the fight, seeing as how I reckoned that it was a pesky cussart'n thing. I spoke to the fat cuss about it myself."

"And what did he say?" demanded the Californian, eagerly.

"Oh, he sed he was sart'in that cur boys didn't stand any show ag'in' this fellow and his crowd, and thought it would have gone ag'in' his grain to scopp me, yet seeing as how money is money, he couldn't resist the temptation to clean me out."

"The explanation is reasonable enough," the alcalde observed, thoughtfully; the expression upon his face plainly showing how great was the interest he took in the matter.

"Yes, you couldn't very well pick a fuss with a man for acting so durned sensible."

"And yet, for all that, there is something that whispers to me that this sharp's success is not all due to pure luck."

"Then Bowers is a-playing it on you; thar's no other way that the trick could be worked. Tain't onpossible that the two are in cahoots to clean you out."

"And if this infernal thing continues it will work it!" the alcalde exclaimed, savagely. "I am a rich man, worth a million or so, but it isn't all in clean cash so that I can lay my hands on it at a moment's notice. The greater part of it is invested; I couldn't turn it into ready money under a year, and then I should be obliged to sacrifice a large sum to do it."

"As it is, this fellow has pushed me so near the wall that my balance at the bank is totally wiped out, and I have been obliged to overdraw; and as, from what I heard, I reckoned they wouldn't stand another pull, in order to raise funds I have been obliged to get money on my Old Hat shares and some other collateral that I've put up; I've raised a hundred thousand, for I want to skin this fellow if I can; but suppose Bowers is in league with this sharp—suppose he has entered my service for the express purpose of betraying me to my foe, who is no other than Dick Talbot, for I am sure of it, despite his disguise?"

"Durned if you don't take my breath away! but thar's Bowers now, call him in and put it to him."

"Good, summon him!" De Welcher cried.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BOWERS ON THE RACK.

THE statement of the chief of police was correct. Bowers was sauntering along toward the hotel, so as to be in readiness for his nightly duty.

As the alcalde had surmised, the veteran bumper had had an exceedingly hard task in living up to his contract.

He had been for so long a time accustomed to acting according to "his own sweet will," that to content himself with jogging along in harness, as it were, was terribly hard.

Bowers was a man who had never been known to refuse a drink, no matter how

many he had already had, but as the dealer of the bank it was necessary that his head should be clear and his hand steady, and so he had made it a rule never to drink anything after five in the afternoon.

But he made up for this deprivation by getting gloriously full every day before that hour, then at five precisely, he would make his uncertain way to his bunk—he had a room at the back of the hotel—sleep for two hours, was called promptly at seven; got up, dipped his head in a pail of water and so was able to come up “smiling” for supper. Then he took a stroll down the street, indulged in a pipe to quiet his nerves, and when the time came for him to take his place as the chief minister of King Faro, to use his own expressive saying, he was, “on deck, every time!”

Bowers had just finished his pipe when the chief of police opened the window and called to him.

“Come up?” exclaimed the veteran in reply; “all right, me noble dook! I’ll be on hand in two ways of a goat’s tail!”

“Now put it to him strong,” Benefast remarked. “He’s a slippery cuss and will dodge you if he kin.”

“Let me alone for that; if I find him at all obstinate I will put the screws on him in a way that he will despise,” answered the alcalde, significantly.

Bowers soon made his appearance, nodded politely as he entered, sunk gracefully into the chair that Benefast pushed over to him, and then, leaning back, grinned in the genial manner peculiar to him.

“Wa-al, now, this hyer pictur’ does my heart good!” he declared—“the big boss of this hyer town and the high-cockalorum of the Shasta Bar roosters a-confabbing together.”

At the first glance the alcalde saw that Bowers was still slightly under the influence of liquor, something which he had never noticed before at such an hour as this since the bumper had been in his employ.

The Californian determined to open fire at once.

“See here, Bowers, haven’t you been well treated since you have been in my service?” he demanded.

“Well treated, mighty satrap? You kin jest bet all your pile on that and you would win every time!”

“And you have had no cause to complain?”

“Nary time! sides, that ain’t the kind of a man I am. If you didn’t treat me well, I should jest quietly git up and dust. That’s the kind of hairpin I’m made of! Oh, I’m the clean white article and no mistake. You jest ask anybody w’ot knows me, and I reckon you won’t have to go far to find out either, for if thar is a man in this hyer hull State of Californy better known than I am, or a galoot that has got more friends, I would jest like to see him, and then thar would be the tallest kind of a fight. He or me would have to die, and don’t you forget it.”

“Bowers, you are using a good many words, but is there the least truth in what you say?” the alcalde demanded, leaning forward and fixing his eyes sternly upon him.

The veteran drew himself up with an injured air.

“Me noble lord, you hit me whar I live when you do doubt the truth of any talk that I give out. Why, whar I’m known my word is jest as good as my bond. Down in Poker Flat in ’sixty-one—it were the time of big stories, and when a whopper started on its travels the boyees afore they took it in used for to ask, ‘W’ot does old Joe Bowers say—does he go his pile on it?’ and if the answer came back that I reckoned it was a sure enuff thing, then the yarn was swallowed, body and boots!”

“Taffy!” ejaculated the chief of police.

“Nary time!” cried Bowers, indignantly; “truth, me royal nibs, or may I be kicked to death by spavined mules!”

“Bowers, I think you have gone back on me!” exclaimed the Californian, sternly, and fixing a menacing look upon the veteran.

“Gone back on you! why, how in thunder kin you think sich a thing?” and Bowers shook his head and gave vent to a dismal sigh.

“Well, I do think it, and what is more I believe it is the truth, too. You have been giving me the ‘brace’! You have worked

it so that this infernal Red Richard has been able to skin the bank.”

“W’ot, me?” and Bowers looked the picture of astonishment.

“Yes, you, and no one else. Oh, it’s no use for you to try and play any gum-game on me. I’m up to your tricks, and I will not have it. You are a confederate of this cursed sharp, and between you, you have succeeded in robbing me of over three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Oh, alcalde, you are jest a-putting it on too thick, you know!” Bowers protested. “Of course I s’pose it does look kinder suspicious, but it was the cuss’s luck, and nothing else. Why should I go cahoots with him ag’in’ you? That ain’t reasonable.”

“It isn’t safe!” hissed De Welcher through his clinched teeth, “for if I was sure of it I would have you killed with as little compunction as though you were a mad-dog.”

“In course, and quite right, too; and do you think I don’t know it? By me halidom! you are ’bout the last man in the world that I should want to pick out for to have fun with. S’pose I don’t know that you’ve got arms long enough to reach clean around the world if you were arter a cuss that you hated? Do you think I want any of that in mine? Not much! Not if the court knows itself, and she thinks she do! That war jest w’ot I war a-tellin’ this red-haired cuss to-night, jest afore you hailed me.”

“Who—Red Richard?”

“That’s the man! He was a-poking fun at me, you know, ’cos he succeeded in downing my apple-cart, and he was jest a-blowing that he was a-going to keep at it until he busted the bank for good and all. ‘You can’t do it,’ says I; ‘you don’t know the man you’re tackling; he’s got the Bank of Californy at his back!’ ‘I don’t give two shakes of a mule’s leg for that!’ says he. ‘I’m going for to keep on busting his bank until I drive him out of the camp, and then I’m going in to be alcalde myself!’”

“The cussed scoundrel!” exclaimed Benefast.

De Welcher did not speak, but his brow grew dark with a savage frown.

“And he g’in you a dig, too, chief,” continued the veteran. “How is the alcalde’s jackal gittin’ on?” he asked, jest as I was a-sailing away with a kind of a disdainful air, as if I was disgusted with talking to sich a galoot. ‘How’s the bully chief of police who put his men up to take the trick, but was skeered to chip in the game himself? Jest tell him to hurry his cakes and git some more policemen for me to chaw up, ’cos I’m hungry for more fun.’”

“Durn his eyes!” growled Benefast, “I’ll give him all the fun he wants afore long if he ain’t mighty keeful!”

“That is jest w’ot he wants, chief; he’s jest spiling for a chance to climb you; he’s been boasting around town that he wouldn’t like any better fun.”

“I reckon he’ll git more fun than he bargains for if he attempts to try it!” exclaimed the chief, endeavoring to assume an air of bravado, but plainly showing that he was worried by the intelligence.

The chief of police was a bull-dog, but even the most savage brute of this kind learns to know its master, and Benefast felt satisfied that Red Richard would be apt to prove too much for him in a personal contest, and he was not eager for the encounter.

“If you are my man, and true to me, show me some way to get even with this fellow!” the alcalde exclaimed.

“I kin do it! bet yer life on it!” Bowers cried. “Now I can’t come the brace in faro—I never learned it, as I told you long ago—but when it comes to short cards, you kin bet all the dust thar is in Californy that I kin handle them as well as any sharp that ever took a card into his hand. Now fix things to-night so as to get this cuss into a leetle game of poker. He’s a right good player, too, for he’s skinned some of the boys pretty bad since he struck the town. I heerd he got away with Lee Sing t’other night, and the man w’ot kin do that is no slouch, I kin tell you. He’s kinder proud ’bout his poker-playing, for I heerd him tell a crowd thar he reckoned he could hold his own with ary man that ever slipped a card. Now put a limit on the bank to-night—say only a hundred, and then it can’t be busted. He’ll growl, of course, and you kin say that

if he wants to try a hack at poker you’ll oblige him for all he wants to put up.

“He’ll jump at the chance, you bet, and then, some time, when it’s my deal, and you find yourself with an invincible hand, jest you go for him, and at one whack you kin skin him for all he’s got; for I’ll ring in a cold deal on him, gi’n him a hand good enuff for a man to bet his life upon, but yourn will be a leetle better.”

“It’s a big idee!” cried Benefast.

“It ought to work,” the alcalde remarked.

“Sure to do it, me royal cully.”

And so the scheme was arranged that at one single coup was to avenge the Californian upon the bold intruder.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LEETLE GAME.

BOWERS proved to be a true prophet for events that night transpired about as he had predicted.

A little after ten o’clock Red Richard made his appearance in the Grand Pacific Saloon, and about the first thing that met his gaze was a notice tacked on the wall right back of the faro table which read:

“The limit of this game to-night is one hundred dollars; no bets over that sum will be received.”

The disgust that the red-haired sharp experienced upon perusing this notice was at once expressed in words:

“No bets over a hundred dollars, eh?” he exclaimed. “Well, what sort of a one-horse game do you call this, anyway? One hundred dollars! Oh! the bank is weakening, and pretty badly too, for sure! One hundred dollars! why, that’s only a flea-bite! And I thought this was the bank that boasted that there wasn’t money enough in California to make it back down.”

“That is the say-so to-night, stranger,” responded Bowers, in his most affable manner.

“See here, do you consider this the sort of deal that ought to be played?” indignantly demanded the sharp. “What earthly fun is to be got out of a game limited to a hundred when here stands a man willing to bet thousands? Pardner, this is not the square thing nohow you can fix it!”

“Can’t help it, pilgrim; that’s the orders from head-quarters, and you must obey orders, you know, even if you break owners.”

“Yes, I s’pose so, but that busts all the fun that there is in the racket for me,” Red Richard replied, evidently greatly annoyed. “What do you s’pose I care to fool around with hundred-dollar bets? Why, it would take a week to break a bank, backed by any capital at all, at any such two-penny game as that.”

“See hyer, pilgrim, if you are really hungry for a big game, why don’t you get in with some first-class poker party—some gang that when they get the cards in their hand will raise you for all you are worth.”

“That is exactly the party that I am looking for, my bold buccaneer; where can I strike it?”

“After the bank closes, about twelve, I will put you on the scent.”

“All right, that satisfies me; that is exactly what I want, but as for your paltry hundred-dollar limit games, that is not the kind of mutton that I am after at all.”

“Wa-al, you kin amuse yourself a leetle, just to pass away the time,” Bowers suggested.

“That isn’t a bad idea,” replied the sharp, and so he took a seat at the table and began to play.

The saloon was full of people, for since the advent of Red Richard in the town, his big game being the subject of general conversation, served to attract all the loungers in the town to the Grand Pacific Saloon.

It was not every day that from five to fifty thousand dollars could be seen risked upon the turn of a card.

But this evening there wasn’t the least excitement about the game. The sharp contented himself with fifty-dollar bets, and luck ran in such a strange fashion that when twelve o’clock came, the time for closing up, neither the bank nor the daring player could boast of any particular gains. It was doubtful if either one was over a hundred ahead on the night.

Bowers protested that Red Richard had skinned the game for a hundred or two, while the sport, on the contrary, declared

that he was at least a hundred dollars poorer off than when he had sat down to the table.

The crowd slowly dispersed after Bowers had declared the game closed for the night, at the same time observing to the sharp that he would "see him later."

Red Richard waited in the outer saloon, and there was joined by The-Man-from-Red-Dog, who had been enjoying himself at some of the popular resorts of the camp.

The pair were taking a sociable glass of wine at the counter when Bowers came up.

The sharp introduced Dandy Jim, and the two acted as though they were perfect strangers and had never met before. There were plenty of eyes upon them, and to both of the adventurers caution had become a second nature.

"Glad to meet you!" cried The-Man-from-Red-Dog.

"You do me proud," Joe Bowers exclaimed.

Then the three indulged in a "smile" together.

"The alcalde is going to boss the leetle poker-party to-night," Bowers explained; "the chief of police is into it, and your humble servant to command. The alcalde is right hot to git at you; he says you have skinned him pretty well already, and he is anxious for a chance to get hunk."

"Or get bu'sted," Red Richard added, significantly.

"He's willing to try his luck on that. He allows that it ain't possible for you to keno every time."

"That may be true, but I'm willing to try it on, all the same. Dandy, will you come along? It will be a big game, you know."

"I'm yer antelope, sir, cl'ar from my head to my heels!" The-Man-from-Red Dog declared. "A big game is exactly what I like. That is the kind of thing that I'm hungering arter."

And just at this moment the Chinaman, Lee Sing, came ambling into the saloon, with the smile, childlike and bland, which he always wore upon his face.

"And hyer's another rooster w'ot will be glad to chip in!" Joe Bowers declared, as soon as he caught sight of the almond-eyed son of the Celestial kingdom.

So Lee Sing was instantly hailed and invited to make one of the party.

"Me playee pokee, allee samee 'Melican man?" he asked.

"Yes, come up, John: we're anxious to rope in some pilgrim that we can skin without any trouble," Bowers declared.

"You no skinnie me—me skinnie you, shoo fly, allee samee 'Melican man!"

"The United States talk of the heathen is rather mixed, but I reckon that anybody that hears it is able to make out what he means," The-Man-from-Red-Dog observed, with a grin.

The rest nodded assent.

"Are you well heeled, John?" Red Richard inquired. "We are in for a big game to-night, and if you are not well heeled, financially, you had better not come in."

"I tell you w'ot it is, heathen; arter we get through with you, yer pocket-book will look as if an elephant had walked over it," said Bowers.

"Me no cavee—me boss boyee—bettee allee dust on it—me son of a sea-cookee on wheels," the "John" answered proudly.

However limited his knowledge of the English language might be, he had picked up all the slang going, and slung it out with a "perfect loosness," as Bowers remarked.

"Where is this little racket to come off?" Red Richard asked.

"In the private room back of the saloon; and if you are all ready we kin slide in now," Bowers replied.

"The quicker the better!" exclaimed the sport.

"And that is the kind of man I am, too—a reg'lar up and up hair-pin, and no mistake!" cried Dandy Jim.

"I s'pose you are anxious too, John?" and Bowers grinned at the Chinaman. "Anxious to get skinned so as to find out how it feels."

"Bettee you two dollal you gittee skinned!" retorted Lee Sing, defiantly.

There was a general laugh at this, and Red Richard remarked:

"Bowers, there isn't the least bit of use for you to try and make the John take water, for he isn't that kind of a heathen."

"Wa-al, we'll know all about it afore morning," Bowers remarked, as he led the way to the small room at the back of the saloon.

It was an apartment about twelve feet square, and the only furniture in it was a table and half a dozen chairs.

The alcalde and Benefast were seated at the table engaged in a game when the others entered.

"Aha! me noble dooks, you're at it, I see!" Bowers exclaimed. "I have taken the liberty to invite these hyer gents in for to have some fun."

"They're welcome, if they are well heeled," observed the alcalde, "for both the chief of police and myself feel in the humor for a big game to-night."

"What's the limit?" Red Richard inquired.

"Nary limit," replied De Welcher.

"That's the kind of critters we air," added Benefast.

"I ain't struck sich good society for a heap of moons!" the Red-Dogite declared.

"Help yourselves to chairs, gentlemen," the alcalde said. "Benefast, we'll call this little game between you and I a draw."

"Certainly!"

The new-comers seated themselves at the table.

"Bowers, will you have the kindness to go out and get half a dozen fresh packs of cards, and bring in a little 'Oh, be joyful!' so we can wet our whistles before we begin? I suppose, gentlemen, there isn't any of you will object to that part of the programme?"

The alcalde was quite right in coming to this conclusion, for one and all nodded assent.

The cards were brought, likewise the liquid refreshment, and after the party had done justice to it, the alcalde stripped off the wrapper of one of the packs of cards.

"They are the common star-backs, gentlemen," he observed, passing the cards around for inspection, and the party examined them narrowly, for every old poker-player is afraid of a "marked" pack.

They cut for deal and Bowers won.

"Now then, my gay and festive roosters! hyer's for fun!" he cried, as he shuffled the cards with nimble fingers.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BIG STAKES.

DE WELCHER sat at the head of the table, the chief of police on his right hand, and Bowers on his left. Red Richard opposite to the alcalde at the foot of the table, The-Man-from-Red-Dog on his right hand, and the Chinaman on his left.

"No limit to the betting, I believe," Bowers observed, shuffling the cards with the dexterity born of long practice.

"Nary limit," replied the Californian, dryly, and with a sort of half-defiant look at the sharp, as if to invite him to the contest.

"Well, I reckon that will suit all of us," Red Richard remarked, in his easy way, "except the John here, and we ought to fix it so he can have a show for his money, for if we raise the 'blind' over ten dollars he'll be afraid to 'come in' even if he held four aces, and had all the kings up his sleeve."

There was a general laugh at this sally, but Lee Sing became indignant.

"Me no flaid!" he declared, "me playee allee samee 'Melican man! Me bettee top-side pile! Me no flaid to come in if one million dollal put up, how high! you see me allee time!"

"I reckon though that we really ought to examine the John afore we begin the game," Bowers suggested, gravely, and with a knowing shake of the head. "I remember onc't down in Dutch Flat, in 'Fifty-one, I was in a leetle game with a Chinaman, and arter he corraled our ducats we went for him, and durn me if he didn't have eighteen sets of face cards up his sleeves and in his trowers. We got even with him though; we hung him with a rope made out of his own cue."

"Dum!" cried Lee Sing, in a state of great excitement, "you no hangee me! Look! you catchee anything up legs, downee sleeves, me chip in t'ousand dollal!" And he jumped up so he could be examined.

"Oh, sit down, John!" exclaimed the sharp while the rest of the party roared with laughter; "he's only trying to make game of you!"

"Game?" cried Lee Sing, who did not comprehend the meaning of the phrase; "labbit game; me no labbit—me catchee labbit top-side hill, makee bullee stew."

"Oh, you're a healthy rabbit!" Bowers remarked; "and arter we git through skinning you I reckon you will feel like one."

By this time the cards were dealt, and the Chinaman, resuming his seat, took up his hand, following the example of the rest.

"I say, w'ot's the ante?" asked the Red-Dogite, as he glanced at his cards with the expression of a man who had a good hand.

"Five dollars," suggested the alcalde. "We ought to put it at a figure that will make the game interesting."

The rest all agreed to this, and then they proceeded to make their bets.

For half a dozen hands the game proceeded without any particularly large betting being indulged in by anybody, and then the deal came round again to Bowers.

"Gen'lemen, it seems to me that, like the boys that I once heard tell on, some on us are skeered and the others dasn't," he remarked as he shuffled the cards vigorously. "We ain't had a bet big enough to raise the ha'r on a yaller dog's back since the game begun."

"Got to have some keerds to bet on afore you kin sling yer money out," growled The-Man-from-Red Dog, who was digusted with the luck that had attended him so far.

"No caldee, no bettee," the John observed. "Gimme allee aces me bettee big."

"No doubt—no doubt," remarked Red Richard, "but the boss poker-player is the man that takes the pot without any cards worth speaking of in his fist."

"Don't matter the wag of a hungry mule's tail what a man has got in his fist, so long as he has a couple of dirks up his sleeve or down into his boot!" Bowers exclaimed, as he dealt the cards. "But this hyer is the worst crowd that I ever struck; w'ot between trying to slip a few of the face-cards into my fond embrace and watching the heathen to see that he didn't come the same trick, I have got most beautifully left. But thar you are ag'in! the table's sot; lemme heer from you, brother pilgrims!"

"I'm in," said the alcalde, "twenty-five for me."

"So am I!" exclaimed the chief of police, shoving over his money.

"Wa-al, you kin jest bet that I'm in!" cried Dandy Jim, "and in to stay, too—jest you mind that, all of yer—to stay till my hide gits gray and all my teeth drop out!"

"If that is the case, I think I will have to keep you company," and Red Richard added some half-eagles to the pot.

"Oh, belly goodee!" chimed in the Chinaman, throwing more gold pieces on top of the sharp's coins. "Me skinee gang, allee samee 'Melican man!"

"Cuss my cats! if I ain't into the b'iling, too!" Bowers observed, adding another five to the general store. "Oh, if this don't make me weep joyful tears—so sociable, and if we don't screw our courage up to the sticking p'int, thar'll be a heap of us broke afore we're much older. Now, then, strictly business! how many cards do you galoots want?"

"One card," responded the alcalde.

"Wa-al—wa-al, I reckon you've got a heap of a hand, if you only want one," Bowers remarked, as he dealt the card.

"You kin give me two," said Benefast, "Ain't got four aces and a king this time, have you?" and Bowers supplied the chief of police.

"I reckon two keerds will about fit me!" exclaimed the Red-Dogite.

"Aha! my gentle friend, are you a-drawin' to a bob-tail flush?" suggested the dealer, and then he turned to Red Richard, who, leaning back in his chair, was complacently surveying the rest. "Now, my long-ha'rd pard, how are you fixed?"

"Nary card, thank you; I stand pot."

At this announcement the players looked at each other.

If the sharp was so well satisfied with his hand that he didn't want any cards, it signified one of two things—either he had an invincible hand that he felt positive could not be beaten, or else he was "bluffing," hoping by the announcement to scare the rest, and by big bets to rake in the pile.

Bowers shook his head.

"Pard, if you think you kin skeer us, I jest want to remark that, as far as I am concerned, you've got the wrong pig by the ear!"

There wasn't any of the party that seemed to see much fun in this remark, for Red Richard's action had made them all look rather serious.

"How many, John?" quoth Bowers.

"Two cald."

"Two cald!" squeaked the dealer, imitating the peculiar intonation of the Chinaman. "Why don't you say two cards—c, a, r, d, s—like a man, and be durned to you?" and he slid the "papers" to the John.

"Me say two calds, allee time; me skinee you, too, fool 'Melican man!" responded Lee Sing, indignantly.

"Oh, you will, will you?" exclaimed the bummer, sarcastically. "Well, I only want one card; do you hear that, you 'tarnal valer-skinned, china-eyed Chinaman? W'ot does that mean, eh? Riddle me that riddle, you bow-legged, knock-kneed son of Confucius! I'll elucidate, for you wouldn't git it through your ha'r, if you air bald-headed, in a month of Sundays! It means that I've got a hand good enuff for a man to bet the sun and moon onto, and h'ist in the stars as a chromo!"

"More betting and less talk, Bowers, will make the game work quicker," suggested the alcalde.

Bowers grinned, for he was too old a stager to mind anything but a knock-down argument.

"Well, alcalde, it is your say-so," he observed. "Chip in, and lift us out of our boots if you've got the cards in your hand to do it with."

"Oh, I'll go a trifle on my hand—fifty thousand dollars as a starter; how does that strike you all?" and the Californian threw a check drawn on the Bank of California for fifty thousand dollars upon the table.

Every man at the table, with the exception of Red Richard, started in surprise, and then leaned forward, and took a good look at the check as if they doubted the evidence of their ears.

"Oh, there it is, gentlemen, it's good for fifty thousand, and I think my hand is worth that amount, and perhaps a trifle more," the alcalde exclaimed. "I reckon I'm a fool for chipping in so soon. I ought to have let you fellows put up your dust for a while before I scared you off, for I suppose it's a horse to a hen that there will not be a single one of you dare to 'see' my bet."

"Well, fifty thousand is a leetle too strong for me," Benefast remarked, throwing down his cards, "although I have got a right smart show of a hand, two pair, good enough for a man to go a few hundred on, but when you slap fifty thousand at me, then I beg to be excused."

"W'ot's fifty thousand dollars if you've got the keerds to back it?" cried Dandy Jim. "I'd jest as soon put up fifty thousand as roll off a log; but this time you've got me; I've got three of a kind too, but I'm gwine to pass."

"I'm in," said Red Richard, carelessly taking a small piece of paper from his pocket, and tossing it upon the table. "I'm in for I think you're only bluffing. I don't believe that you've got the cards in your hand to warrant such a bet. There's Wells & Fargo's receipt for a hundred thousand dollars. I see you, and go you fifty thousand better!"

All was now excitement; the Chinaman and Bowers promptly threw up their hands, leaving only the alcalde and the sharp to fight for the valuable "pot."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN EXPLOSION.

THE alcalde knitted his brows. He had expected to force Red Richard into betting largely, but he had not calculated upon the sharp responding quite so liberally.

"A hundred thousand for me!" and he threw four checks on the pile.

"I'll see that hundred thousand and go you another hundred thousand better!" and Red Richard threw two more of the express company's acknowledgments upon the table.

The alcalde's face fully betrayed the deep emotion under which he labored. He felt sure that he had the sharp in his power, and yet the magnitude of the stakes appalled him.

To meet the other's dare he would have to increase his bet to over three hundred thousand dollars, all the ready money that he possessed in the world, and although he had everything arranged so that it would be impossible for him to lose, yet, as he glanced nervously at his hand, the thought came to him that, if by any untoward chance he should not win, it would be ruin.

But he clinched his teeth tightly together. It was not possible; there were the cards in his fist, the best hand that could be held in the game, and it was impossible that the cunningly devised plan to ruin the sport could miscarry, for this little game of poker was a carefully arranged scheme to fleece Red Richard of all his possessions.

The wily Joe Bowers had suggested the plan, and so far it had worked to perfection.

Why, then, thought the Californian to himself, should he hesitate to administer the finishing blow when he had his enemy completely in his power?

The sharp noticed the hesitation of the other, and a sarcastic smile came over his features.

"I'm waiting on your excellency," he remarked. "My money is up, and in this game, you know, money talks. I reckon my hand is worth all I can raise to put on it, and, in fact, I'm so sweet on this particular fistful of cards I now hold that I would almost be willing to bet my life upon it."

As the sharp uttered this vaunting remark, a brilliant idea occurred to the Californian.

Why not follow the example sometimes set by desperate gamblers, and transform the game of cards into a duel to the death?

The game was his beyond the shadow of a doubt.

He held four aces backed by a king, an invincible hand at straight draw-poker when the game is played correctly.

Some people, who ought to know better, have an idea that a "straight flush" will beat four aces, but it is not so, unless by special agreement between the players entered into before the game is commenced. This is the law of the game, and among good players it is always respected.

"You are willing to bet your life on your hand, eh?" the alcalde observed. "Well, all I've got to say is, when a man is willing to stake his life upon the hazard of the cards, it shows that he thinks he's got a pretty sure thing of it."

"That's exactly the way I feel about the matter. You couldn't size me up better if you fooled around the thing for a week," Red Richard answered, promptly.

The rest began to open their eyes about this time. The game bid fair to go ahead of anything they had ever experienced, and each man felt a natural pride when he reflected that in time to come he should be able to boast he had taken part in the biggest game that was ever played in the Golden State, especially renowned for this sort of thing.

"Wake snakes and come at me," ejaculated The-Man-from-Red-Dog. "Durn my gizzard if I would be willing to risk my life, even if I had a hand full of pictur's, and all the rest of the face keerds corraled in my boots!"

"I tell you w'ot it is, feller-sinners, a big game is the game to play," remarked the veteran bummer. "Thar ain't the least bit of use of being a cuss in this hyer world if you ain't head and ears ahead of all the rest of the cusses."

"Me no bettee life!" observed the "John," with a dubious shake of the head. "Me no cale how big me bettee, but no bettee life. Him gone, no comee back; dead John, no goodee—played out!"

"I'm with the heathen, every time!" the chief of police exclaimed. "His head is as level as a die on this 'ere question. When yer money's gone, there's a chance for you to get more, but when the sands of life run out, then a man weakens, loses his grip, and don't stand no show for to catch on ag'in."

"All you say, gentlemen, is quite correct, and I shall not attempt to deny it, but in this case I'm running the show, and if I come out at the little end of the horn, why, it will be my funeral and nobody else's," the sharp replied. "It was a careless remark of mine maybe, that I was willing to bet my life on my hand, but I'm one of those kind of men

who is willing to back up his say-so every time. I stick like wax to what I said, and not one jot or tittle of it will I take back. I said I was willing to stake my life on my hand, and so I am. If my friend on the opposite side of the table thinks the cards he holds are good enough to win against the papers I hold in my fist, let him put up his money and see my ducats, and then if he wants to go life against life, I'm his man!"

For a moment there was a breathless silence, and then the alcalde determined at one fell swoop to end the struggle.

"All right; I accept the defiance, although it is hardly fair, for I know I'm betting on a sure thing."

"Sure things slip up sometimes," the sport remarked; and every head at the table nodded assent, with the exception of the Californian's.

They had all been there and knew how it was themselves.

"I'll risk this one," the alcalde observed, dryly. "There's the money," and he added the precious slips of paper to the already colossal "pot." "Now, how about the other part of the programme?"

"Life for life, of course, and the man that loses the stake is at the mercy of his opponent."

"Yes, but that isn't definite enough," the Californian remarked. "I don't want to take your life, even though I won it, for the citizens of the camp might not take the same view of the matter that we do; they might call it by the ugly name of murder and ask me to an account for it, and just at the present I am not at all anxious to figure as the chief actor in a hanging match."

"I'll tell you how the matter can be arranged; I've heerd tell of jest such a case before," remarked Benefast. "The man that loses is to waltz out to some quiet spot, put his revolver to his head and let her go."

The chief of police being a party to the snare in which the sharp had been entrapped was anxious to complete the job in the most scientific manner possible.

"That appears to be an easy way of getting around it," said the Californian, "and as far as I am concerned, I am willing to agree to it."

"I can't see any objection to the plan," announced the sharp. "But how about the time for the operation—when is it to be performed? We might as well have the whole thing understood, you know."

"Oh, yes, that's right!" remarked the chief. "I s'pose thar ought to be a leetle time allowed, so a man could have a chance to settle up his affairs. Say the picnic is to come off in ten hours from the time that the game is decided. That will allow plenty of time for either of you two gentlemen to square up anything that ought to be fixed afore you take the last leap into the dark."

"In ten hours then from the time the game is decided the losing man is to retire to some convenient solitude, and there make a hole in his head with his revolver ball," said the sharp, looking the alcalde straight in the face, and puzzling the latter by the strange light which shone in his eyes.

For a moment a misgiving entered the mind of the Californian. Was there any possible way by means of which his triumph could be wrested from him?

No, it was not possible. Red Richard was safely in the snare, and not only would his money be taken from him, but his life as well.

"That's the programme!" exclaimed the schemer, lightly, for his spirits were rising at the prospect of triumphing so completely over his foe.

"Sail in then, and let us have a show of hands. I'm really getting impatient, for this is as big a game as I ever played. It is not often that a man's life depends upon how big a hand he holds in a game of poker!" exclaimed Red Richard.

"I'll put you out of your misery immediately," the alcalde observed, with a sardonic smile. "You have lost, for I hold an invincible hand. See! Four aces and a king!" and he spread the cards out upon the table, and then leaned back in his chair and glared triumphantly at his antagonist.

The sharp leaned over the table and looked at the cards, and upon his face, to the astonishment of all present, there did not appear the slightest trace of agitation.

"Oh, you may look at 'em!" the Californian cried—"look at 'em until your eyes grow sick and your heart becomes sore. There's the hand that wins, four aces and a king, and all your looking will not change them into anything else; your money is mine and your life is forfeited!"

"Oh, no, I guess not," the sharp replied, as cool as a cucumber. "Alcalde, you are entirely too previous in your remarks. The game is not yours. You have lost; the pot is mine and the revolver-ball falls to your share!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A LIVELY DISCUSSION.

ALL started in utter amazement as the clear tones of the sport fell upon their ears, and as for the alcalde, he could hardly believe he heard aright.

"What do you mean—are you mad?" he cried. "Thar's my hand, four aces, and that can't be beat!"

"No, I admit that four aces cannot be beaten when a player comes fairly by them, but those four aces were never dealt to you in this game! There has been cheating around the board, and I tell you I'm not the man to tamely submit to be robbed of my money, to say nothing of my life!"

The face of the Californian became as pale as death, and he thrust his hand under the table as though to draw a weapon, but the eye of Dandy Jim was upon him; he was prepared for just such an emergency, and in a twinkling he displayed a cocked six-shooter.

"Hold yer hosses, alcalde, if you please!" he exclaimed. "We don't want no we'pons drawn at this air stage of the game. We sot down hyer to play poker with keerds, not with pistles, and I reckon the furst man that tries to switch off onto that track will git plugged so quick that he'll never know what hurted him! It's my horn w'ot's blowing, and you had better pay attention to its toots if you ain't anxious to git salivated for kingdom come."

"This is an outrage!" yelled Benefast; "and if thar's going to be a free fight I reckon you'll have to count me in!" and he grabbed one of the revolvers in his belt.

The almond-eyed son of the far East was on the lookout for just such a movement, though, and before the chief of police could draw his revolver he found himself "covered" by the Chinaman, who leveled a ready-cocked six-shooter at him with a promptitude that fairly took his breath away.

"Me see you and go one bettee!" observed Lee Sing. "No chin-chin much but shootee allee samee. 'Melican man. You draw le-volver me puttee you full big holes—me boss boyee with glass eye! You savvy?"

And the chief did savvy, for the "John" had the "drop" on him, and from the expression in the eyes of the Celestial he felt pretty certain that the washee-washee would be as good as his word; so his under-jaw dropped and he leaned back in his chair aglath.

The Californian realized that affairs had taken a most unpleasant turn, but he hoped to pull through, for though the stranger sharp might suspect that there had been foul play, yet he did not see how in the world he would be able to prove it, so he put on a bold face.

"Oh, we don't want any pistols!" he declared, "and, sir, let me tell you that you totally misunderstood my movement; I hadn't the least idea of drawing a weapon. I want to win the game by fair means, or not at all. I'm no gambler to cheat at cards, and I want you to understand that, too!"

"I understand all about the matter, and I have smoked your little game right from the beginning!" the sharp exclaimed, contemptuously. "I'm no greenhorn, you know, no pilgrim tenderfoot that you can ring in a cold deal upon without his knowing it. I'm rot the kind of man to allow you to play poker with *two* packs of cards when I have an interest in the pot!"

"What do you mean—how dare you make such a charge against me?" cried the Californian, growing white with rage.

"I mean exactly what I say; in this last deal two packs of cards have been used—used by you. I guessed what you were up to, and I have been on the watch for you right from the beginning!" the sharp declared. "You have four aces there, and yet you only caught

one fairly, the other three *don't belong in the game at all!*"

"It's a lie—an infamous lie!" cried the Californian, hoarsely.

The accusation, so totally unexpected had fallen upon him with crushing force, and so completely was he unnerved by it that he hardly knew what to say.

"Nary lie; nothing but the truth! Didn't I tell you that I have been on the lookout for you? I suspected that you would try to snare me into a trap before you got through the game, and so I have kept my eyes open. Every ace in the pack has been in my hand, and I creased one corner of each one of them. You can see it easily enough if you examine that ace of diamonds, which is the only card of the four aces that you came honestly by. I defy you or anybody else to find the mark of my fingers on the other three, and those three you slipped into the game!"

"It's a lie—a cursed lie!" cried the alcalde, who, being thus cornered, knew not what to say.

"Here's my hand, four queens and a king!" exclaimed Red Richard. "I wasn't afraid to bet my life upon it, for I knew the aces were being stolen out of the pack. I detected that some time ago, and I felt sure that somebody was going to try the old trick of slipping in strange cards, and the aces were got out of the way so that they could not be discovered in the pack if the trick was suspected and an investigation demanded!"

"You fat son of a sea-cook!" yelled The-Man-from-Red-Dog, turning the muzzle of his revolver suddenly upon Bowers. "This hyer is your work! Own up to it right away, or I'll riddle ye as full of holes as a nutmeg-grater!"

"Don't shoot—don't shoot for the love of Heaven!" pleaded the champion bummer, apparently in abject fear. "Spare my life, take my money, and I'll tell yer all I know 'bout it. In Adam's fall, we sinned all; this hyer noble galoot of an alcalde tempted me and I slid from grace. I put up the job—I stole the three aces, and I calculated to throw 'em in to him, but you were all a-watching me so closely that I didn't dare to risk it; I knew he could work the trick without them too, 'cos he had an extra set of aces in his waistband."

"Gentlemen, you hear this acknowledgment!" the sharp cried. "I claim the stakes on my hand, for this one he has displayed is a cheat!"

"Will you believe the word of this lying scoundrel against me?" demanded the white-faced alcalde.

"Hyers the proof!" exclaimed the bummer, suddenly seizing the alcalde by the right arm and plucking three cards out of his sleeve where he had secreted them.

There was a pair of fives and a nine-spot. "That's a nice kind of hand to beat four queens with!" cried the sport, in contempt.

The chief of police had been watching his opportunity, and now, taking advantage of the excitement caused by this revelation, he put into operation a scheme which he had concocted.

The Chinaman still threatened him with the revolver, but as Benefast had not manifested any intention of drawing a weapon, Lee Sing was not keeping a very vigilant watch.

Under the table slipped the chief with wonderful quickness, and as everybody else sprung to their feet and grabbed their weapons, he threw the table over toward the sport, instantly extinguishing the light, and then in the darkness there were the sounds of battle.

The Californian had profited by the diversion to draw his weapons and open fire, and as the sharp was standing directly in front of him, he hoped some one of his bullets might take effect.

Three shots he fired, and then sprung through the open window which was just behind him.

Red Richard did not use his weapons; he scorned to kill his foe in the dark, besides that was not the revenge for which he panted.

The alcalde had fired his three shots in rapid succession, and a groan had arisen on the air, sure proof that some one was hurt.

The people in the saloon without, alarmed by the sound of the shots, burst in the door just as the fugitive disappeared through the window.

The opening of the door admitted a flood of light into the apartment.

Strange was the scene that met the eyes of the curious throng as they came rushing in.

They caught a glimpse of the alcalde as he vanished through the window, beheld the rest who had made up the poker-party, crouching low on the floor by the side walls, while in the center of the room, stone dead, lay the figure of the chief of police.

His device to help the Californian out of the scrape into which he had fallen had cost him his life, for every one of the bullets which the alcalde had fired lodged in his body.

"What in thunder is the meaning of this?" cried the foremost man of the crowd, who happened to be the old gray-bearded miner, Long John Scott.

"A leetle difficulty, that's all," responded The-Man-from-Red-Dog, "a leetle misunderstanding 'bout a game of poker. The alcalde tried to ring in a cold deck, wanted to scoop the pot with four aces and three on 'em had no business on the table, seeing as how they came out of a pack of keerds that we warn't a-playing with. This gen'leman smelt a mice," and he pointed to the sharp, "he smoked the animule out and then the boss tried to show fight. The table was up-sot, and the 'cady went in for to git hunk, but in the darkness he pulled his we'pons on the wrong man, and the result is we're out a chief of police and in a first-class funeral."

While Dandy Jim was explaining, Bowers and the Chinaman had been busy in gathering up the precious evidence of wealth so carelessly distributed about the room.

"Why, it's murder, and the cuss must answer for it!" the miner cried.

"It will take an army to pull him out of the mine, to which he has doubtless fled for refuge, and I'm ready to head it!" Red Richard exclaimed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE ATTACK.

GREAT was the excitement among the inhabitants when the full particulars of the tragedy became known, and not a voice was raised in behalf of the once popular magistrate.

As the sport had expected, the Californian had fled directly to the mine.

Ever since the arrival of the sport in the town De Welcher had anticipated, from the vigorous system of warfare inaugurated by the stranger, that in the end he might be forced to the wall, despite the advantages which he seemed to possess, and so he had prepared himself for the worst.

He had weeded out the men in the works until only those were left whom he knew to be bold, desperate fellows, pledged to stand by him to the last.

All the particulars of the "leetle" game of poker had spread like wildfire, the camp was in a ferment, and loud calls were made for the Vigilantes and Judge Lynch's summary court.

A mass-meeting was held in the street in front of the hotel, and the subject was discussed in all its bearings.

The actors in the scene gave their testimony in regard to the matter, and the indignation excited by the recitals was great. The inhabitants of the glorious clime of California in some particulars resemble the men of the ancient Greek race, who held it no disgrace to steal as long as the theft was not discovered.

So in these, our modern days, in the wild West, in the land of the setting sun, to cheat at cards is not a sin until it is found out, but then it is a horrible offense, deserving of the direst punishment, probably because the proud sons of the Orient regard a bungler as being worse than a knave.

After hearing all the particulars, and weighing the evidence, it was the general opinion that the man who was killed met his death by mistake, the bullets which took his life being intended for the victorious sharp who had managed to drive the alcalde into a corner from which there was no escape except by violence.

But for all that, as Long John Scott tersely said:

"The man is dead—he has been slewed, and somebody did the business; 'tain't no good excuse, to my thinking, for any galoot to rise onto his hind legs and allow that the cuss w'ot did the job didn't go for to hit this

feller, but another chap; he war tryin' to wipe out some one, and I reckon, when you come right down to the law of the thing, that it don't make a heap sight of difference 'cos he hit the wrong man instead of the right one. Thar has been bloodshed—reg'lar bloody murder, in fact, and the man w'ot did it ought to be made to answer for it."

This was the general expression of the crowd, and by an almost unanimous vote the old man was selected for the important position of Judge Lynch.

He attempted modestly to evade the responsibility, remarking that there was a heap of men in the town who could double discount him when it came down to the law, but the crowd were resolved that he must serve, and so at last he consented.

Then the armed men who were charged with the task of carrying out the orders of the judge were selected, and Red Richard placed at their head. In the ranks were Bowers, Dandy Jim, Mud Turtle and the Chinaman, who had given ample proof that, when put to the test, he could fight, "allee samee 'Melican man."

"Now we air going to run this hyar thing jest as straight as a string," the old man remarked, after all the arrangements were made. "Every man is going to have a fair show and no favor!"

A yell of approval from the crowd followed this remark.

"The thing looks to be pretty black ag'in' the alcalde, but, mebbe, when we hear his story he kin make it out a hoss of another color!"

The majority of the crowd shook their heads dubiously. They had considerable doubt in regard to the Californian being able to get out of the crime laid at his door.

"Anyhow," continued the judge, "we're going to give him a fair chance to explain if he kin; that's only right, you know."

This was sound logic, and so a committee was appointed to wait upon the fugitive, and make known to him the accusation which had been brought.

The committee, three well-known citizens, departed, and the crowd prepared to make themselves comfortable until their return.

Old Scott in his honesty never for a moment doubted that the Californian would appear before the court and stand trial, but the sharp and his friends laughed at the idea.

Red Richard, thanks to his confederates, was well posted in regard to how matters stood at the mine.

He knew that the works had been fortified like a fort, the men within picked with an eye not to their capabilities as workmen, but as to their skill in the use of weapons and whether they could be depended upon to fight to the death for their employer, regardless of right or wrong.

It was not likely that De Welcher would of his own free will come out of his fort, where he believed he could bid defiance to any force that could be brought against him, and surrender himself for trial.

This supposition was correct, as the committee soon discovered.

The alcalde laughed their communication to scorn.

"Why, are you crazy, you men of the town?" he cried. "Don't you know that you are being made the tools of one of the biggest rascals that ever escaped a white jail? Who is this Red Richard? Do you know? If you don't, I do. It is that infernal villain of a Talbot whom I branded in this very camp as a thief and a murderer only about a year ago. He has contrived in some mysterious way to get rid of the scar which should have followed the branding, but I know him to be the man, all the same. I did intend to kill the scoundrel, and would surely have done so if in the darkness Benefast had not got in the way. I'm deuced sorry that he is dead, for he was one of my best men, but it was an accident that might occur to any one, and I can tell you, I haven't any idea of allowing any mob got up and run by this scoundrel of a Talbot to try me. I'm the chief magistrate of this camp, and although my enemies have managed to get the upper hand just now, it will not be for long. I've the nucleus of an army here, and just as soon as I can raise men enough, I'll come out and make an example of this rascal and of all who dare to uphold him!"

The committee shook their heads, for they

foresaw that there would be bloody work in the near future if the Californian persisted in this idea and so they informed him.

"You will not have time to raise any army," said the spokesman of the three, "for the boys hev got their blood up and they mean business. If you don't surrender peaceably they'll be mighty apt to come down hyer and take you out by force."

De Welcher laughed derisively.

"Oh, you can't scare me with words!" he cried. "I'm too old a bird to take any stock in ghost stories or fairy tales! I understand how the game is running just as well as if I had been up in the town and put the wheels in motion myself. This fellow, taking advantage of the unfortunate accident that occurred last night, and for which I was not to blame, for I only fired to defend my life from a murderous attack, has got up a hue and cry against me. I do not doubt that the whole town is clamoring for my blood now, and if I should be fool enough to surrender myself to your tender mercies, it is a thousand to one that I should be tried, found guilty, condemned and executed with mighty little ceremony, but I haven't any idea of making such a fool of myself."

"Inside of four and twenty hours, when the men of the town have time to think and reflect over the matter, reason will resume its sway and they will see how unjust the accusation is that has been brought against me, and they will be all heartily ashamed that they were fools enough to allow this hemp-deserving scoundrel to lead them by the nose—use them as cat's paws, in fact, to pull his chestnuts out of the fire."

"You don't understand how the thing is," one of the committee endeavored to explain. "Tain't no leetle crowd, but the best men in the camp are out, and they mean business, every time."

"I understand all about it!" the alcalde replied, impatiently, "and you don't get me into any trap if I know myself, and the court thinks she does."

The committee turned to depart, but the spokesman made one last effort.

"Say, I give you my word as a man that if you don't come, thar'll be hot work!"

"You're right—never was more correct in your life; that is, if the idiots whom you represent are mad enough to endeavor to use force!" the Californian cried, defiantly. "I'm well fixed here, ten good men, well armed, plenty of ammunition, lots of grub, and some good stout walls to shelter us. Why, man, use your eyes and look around! It would take an army to get me out of this fort, and I give you fair warning that if we are attacked, there won't be any child's play on our part, but we shall shoot to kill. So, if you are crazy enough to try violence, your blood will be upon your own heads. I wash my hands of all responsibility."

"Alcalde, you're a doomed man," remarked the spokesman, ominously, and then the three departed.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN OLD DEVICE.

WHEN the messengers returned and delivered the defiance of the Californian, there was a general expression of rage.

The Vigilantes are ugly fellows to deal with; for any one to attempt to resist the mandates of Judge Lynch is a terrible offense on the border.

"He's afeard that he won't git a fa'r trial!" observed one of the crowd, evidently deeply indignant that a suspicion of this kind should be entertained, for as another outspoken fellow expressed it:

"It's a slap in the face fur the hull town!"

"He's got to come!" exclaimed old Scott.

"That's the talk I want to hear!" yelled The-Man-from-Red-Dog. "Got to come, you bet yer boots on it!"

And then the crowd took up the cry.

Many demanded that instant action should be taken, but Red Richard counseled otherwise.

"Let us wait until morning," he said. "Give the man time to think over the matter. Perhaps when he comes to reflect upon the subject, he will see the folly of attempting to fight the whole town."

There was a deal of discussion in regard to this, for nearly every man in the throng wanted to have a finger in the pie, and felt privileged to ventilate his opinion.

Scott and the wiser heads in the party agreed with the sharp, and so action was postponed until morning, but a line of sentries were placed so as to completely surround the mine, as it was the impression of the majority of the crowd that the alcalde might attempt to escape under the cover of darkness.

But they wronged the Californian; he hadn't the least idea of doing anything of the kind. Like the man renowned in fable who accosted Noah on the ark and volunteered to be anything from captain to cook, and when his services were declined, told the aged mariner to "go 'long with yer old boat, I don't believe it's going to be much of a shower, anyhow!" so De Welcher reckoned. He hadn't the least idea of the wide-spread feeling against him. He thought the sharp, aided by his friends, had kicked up the disturbance, that the citizens generally cared nothing about the matter, and reckoned that as soon as he had time to collect his forces he could advance on his antagonists and make a bloody end to them.

He was rather astonished though when morning came and he discovered that the works seemed to be encompassed by about all the men in the town, and every one seemed to be in martial array.

His followers, too, looked blue when they scanned the number of the host that threatened them.

The alcalde, who was quick to discover that his forces were not confident in regard to the end of the matter, endeavored to reassure them by asserting that two-thirds of the men they saw were lookers-on, who had come to witness the conflict without taking any active part in it.

No movement was made upon either side until about seven o'clock, then a flag of truce was dispatched by the besiegers.

It was the final offer of the attacking force.

"Surrender, or your blood be on your own heads."

Confident in the strength of his position, the Californian rejected the offer in disdain.

"I make no war on any one," he replied, "but I give you fair warning that if your men are rash enough to attack me here, I will not be answerable for the consequences."

"Oh! we'll snake you out of this afore you know what hurt you," exclaimed the messenger with the flag of truce, who was the red-haired giant, Dandy Jim.

"You had better try it on, if you think the job is going to be such an easy one!" the Californian retorted in anger. "And carry to your men a word of advice from me. Tell them all to make their wills before they commence the picnic, for there will be a great many of them who will not be able to do it after it is over."

"If you're lucky enuff to dodge the bullets you'll stretch hemp afore you're an hour older," replied the giant, as he retreated.

When the result of the interview was reported the besiegers immediately began to prepare for battle, and the men within the works were on the alert.

As the Californian superintended the preparations to repel the threatened attack, his mind could not refrain from going back to the scene which happened on that very spot only about a year ago, when he had led his armed men to the attack and succeeded in making Talbot his prisoner.

What a change had taken place. Now he was besieged, no friends to back his quarrel except the hireling bravos whom his gold had bought; and in Red Richard, apparently in command of the attacking force, he was sure he recognized the man whom he had sworn to ruin.

He had succeeded—he had disgraced his foe and driven him from the town; but now, the tables were turned, and, almost as if by magic, he had been hurled from the topmost round of the ladder of success into the mire of disgrace and defeat.

His gold had been wrested from him and now a hungry mob panted for his life.

"Let them come," he muttered. "I'll teach them such a bloody lesson that few of the fighters who are lucky enough to get away will care to try the game a second time."

But the Californian had met a foeman who was not disposed to give him a single chance.

The sharp had not the least idea of exposing his men by making an open attack upon the strongly-defended position.

On the contrary, he intended to force the besieged to abandon their fortification and come out into the open ground.

He used the old device, the burning arrows, which, shot by his marksmen, soon set fire to the stockade fence and the buildings within.

Vainly the besieged endeavored to combat this novel foe by extinguishing the flames. But as there had not been any rain for a long time, all the wood-work was as dry as tinder, and as there was quite a brisk breeze stirring, the fire soon got under such headway that it was impossible to do anything with it.

So far not a shot had been fired upon either side, but when the flames got beyond control all within the works understood that they must either assault the armed men without or else be roasted like so many helpless rats.

"We'll charge and break through their line, boys!" cried the Californian, in the desperation of despair.

Then putting himself at the head of his men, with loud cries, they sallied forth, but as soon as they got well within range were received by a terrible fire from the weapons of the besiegers.

The alcalde was the first to fall, shot through the temple, and the shock being so great that the life was out of the body almost as soon as it touched the ground.

Six others went down at the same time, and the rest, dismayed by the slaughter, at once threw down their arms and begged for mercy.

There was a cloud on the brow of Red Richard as he surveyed the body of his foe.

The feud was ended now, and the victory was his, yet he regretted that De Welcher had perished by any other hand than his own. Then too he had hoped to be able to secure the Californian alive that he might throw off his disguise and reveal to him that the suspicion he entertained was true.

Red Richard was Dick Talbot, and he had returned to the camp of Shasta Bar in disguise on purpose to compass the ruin of the man who had put up such a deadly affront upon him.

He had succeeded in part, but death had intervened to save the alcalde from the crowning disgrace.

The fight was ended, the debt of hatred paid, and Talbot no longer had reason to disguise his identity.

Never had a man been blessed with truer friends than our hero.

As the reader has doubtless suspected, Joe Bowers had expressly entered the Californian's service in order to betray him, and it was owing to his skill at handling cards that the sharp had been able to win such enormous sums, for Bowers in dealing had deliberately played into his hands.

To the Indian too a vast debt of gratitude was due, for Mud Turtle possessed the Indian secret of a wonderful salve that had the power when applied to a fresh wound of curing it without leaving a scar behind, and so the mark of the brand had been effaced.

And then in the wilds of the lava rocks the savage had come upon some vast deposit of gold "pockets," and with the nuggets so obtained the confederates were able to make head against the wealthy De Welcher.

A few more words and our tale is told.

The old colonel's death, immediately succeeding the Californian's, left the faithful girl free to keep her troth with the man she loved.

Thanks to the wealth he had wrested from the alcalde, added to that obtained from the secret mine, Richard Talbot found himself one of the richest men on the Pacific coast, that country of rich men.

The Old Hat mine became his individual property, and with his four faithful friends our hero made the camp of Shasta Bar boom as it had never boomed before.

Talbot and Carlotta were united, and never since the world began did lover win a truer heart than that which dwelt in the breast of the California girl.

Once again the clouds clear away, and we leave our hero in the bright sunshine of prosperity.

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